Reconstructing Gender in Post-Revolutionary Iran:

Two Perspectives on Women in the Islamic Republic

Transcending the Revolution?

by Akbar Mahdi

Over the past 16 years, most articles on Iranian women have started with the question: How has the Islamic revolution affected Iranian women? The responses to this question have often been broad, partisan, and negative. The fact is that the reality of women’s lives in Iran is far more complicated than can be summarized by a positive or negative affirmation. We need to distinguish between the revolutionary process and the revolutionary outcome. Islam and clerical interpretations of Islam on women, the secular women and the religious women, the poor and the rich, the Western educated and the non-Western educated, and so on, even though they are all interrelated and in some way have been reinforcing, reacting to, or rejecting each other.

The effect of revolution on each of these groups has been different. The process and outcome of the revolution have meant different things for each of these groups even at different periods of the formation of the theocratic state and its eight years’ war with Iraq. Islamist women are quick to point out that they participated in the revolution to bring about the establishment of an Islamic state based on shari’a (Islamic law). Secular women argue that they participated in the revolution in opposition to the Shah’s dictatorship. Many in between argue that they used the veil during the revolution as a symbol of resistance to the Shah’s alienating Westernized attitude toward the native culture. Irrespective of these positions, these groups participated in a broad process of change which, intended or not, has resulted in the establishment of a theocratic state with a very different attitude and view on women’s place and role in society than it advocated during the revolutionary process.

While it is easy to demonstrate that the establishment of the Islamic Republic has meant more restrictions on Iranian women’s lives, it would be a mistake to assume that all women experience and view these restrictions similarly. For Western-educated, middle class women, these restrictions have often resulted in a loss of social status, meaningful employment, and individual autonomy. To them, wearing a chador (an overall cover leaving out only the face) against their wishes is an insult to their dignity. For them, the chador is viewed as the symbol of imprisonment, imposition, backwardness, and immobility. For religious women, who were practically banned from public engagement by their husbands and/or religious authorities in the past, their veiled public presence in the Islamic regime is a symbol of liberation from social and spatial isolation. To them, the chador is a form of protection against the unwanted and undignified looks of sinful men. Today, if they wish it, and their husbands agree, they find it much easier to appear and engage in public life. That such a public life is limited and controlled by men bother these women less than if it would have been a morally inappropriate one.

Aside from the Iranian revolutionary leadership, women are the only social group whose social status has been the subject of controversy among both friends and foes of the Islamic regime in Iran. The regime and its supporters have targeted women as a symbol of their revolutionary moral idealism. It has successfully enforced various restrictions on women’s outside employment, physical mobility, public clothing, and interaction with men in both public and private domains. Women must avoid inappropriate places and behave or speak in accordance with the broadly viewed and never specifically defined codes of “public chastity.”

The attitudes of the leadership of the Islamic Republic toward women has been far from uniform. This attitude can be best characterized as contradictory and generally patriarchal. On the one hand there are liberal Islamic thinkers in the
government who acknowledge the deplorable conditions of the majority of women and advocate promotion of women’s social and economic status. On the other, there are reactionary judges, officials, and even parliamentarians who view women’s departure from home as a violation of Islam and husbands’ and children’s rights. In between, there are numerous feminist and anti-feminist Muslim women and men who see things in shades.

Women have become the cultural barometer of the regime. Whenever the Islamists feel that “their revolution” is losing momentum, they begin a moral campaign targeting women in public places. Although leaders of Iran, like Ali Khamenei, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and many other high-ranking officials in the government claim that the Islamic Republic has been the best thing that has ever happened to Iranian women, that women in Iran are more liberated than anywhere else in the world, the fact remains that they have rarely taken a strong and serious position against unfair treatment of women by local judges, government officials, and moral campaigns against women orchestrated by various basijis (a vigilante group) or local Islamic comitehs. These campaigns are the most visible form of violence against women who do not conform to Islamic codes of dress in public.

Despite all the restrictions and the prevalence of the security apparatus implementing the various contradictory policies of the state toward women, a large portion of Iranian women defy these policies. With every new policy, women find a new way to bypass it.

There has been a tendency among activists, both political and feminist of all political persuasions, to explain women’s status in Iran solely in terms of government attitudes and policies toward women. The fact remains that the status of Iranian women is determined by multitudes of factors, many of which remain above and beyond government control. Patriarchal culture in Iran is so strong that its influence goes beyond religion. Of course, religion and societal traditions intersect and reinforce each other at various levels and in different spheres. Surely, the government with its policies toward women set the tone for the rest of the society. However, the societal values and traditions are often much stronger and influential than the government. For instance, on several occasions after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini indicated that while the chador was the best form of cover for Muslim women, they were free to choose any other form of clothing as long as it met the Islamic criteria (however vaguely defined). In the past three years, there have been numerous efforts by school principals in various localities, especially in small towns, to make the chador the only acceptable cover for girls attending school. The issue was pushed so strongly by the traditionalists that the Ministry of Education was very close to issuing an order making the chador the official cover for girls. Earlier this year, women’s groups took the issue directly to Ayatollah Khamenei, who repeated more or less Khomeini’s view and rejected the imposition of the chador. President Rafsanjani has also been attempting to introduce a relatively more liberal interpretation of women’s role in society, but his colleagues often find his views too liberal and morally too lax.

These cases show that the attitudes about women spring from sources much deeper than the surface of government policies. The Iranian patriarchal tradition, reflected in men’s attitudes toward women and their role in society, has always been strong in Iran. With the Islamization of society by the regime, this culture received new life.

Despite the negatives, there are some hopeful signs that Iranian women are on their way to individual autonomy and freedom. The revolution taught them that they can no longer rely on political and religious leaders for achieving and protecting their rights. There is a higher level of political maturity among women activists who are not willing to postpone the achievement of their rights. Women activists, even the Islamic ones, are demanding that the government live up to its slogans of equality and justice. They are asking for their own political, social, and civil organizations without men’s tutelage.

Iranian women have also begun to speak in a much more colorful language than before, reflecting the diversity of views and opinions about their lives and demonstrating a level of independence never seen before. Relying on their own efforts, these women want, and have begun, to change}

"Many [women] used the veil during the revolution as a symbol of resistance to the Shah’s alienating Westernized attitude toward the native culture." Above, a billboard in Tehran displays a caricature of the Western woman as a wind-up toy.
their lives from the bottom up. They have been working hard to acquire all forms of skills in private schools, night classes, and universities. Today, Iran lacks appointed female ministers and high ranking officials, female singers and dancers, and female judges. However, finding most governmental positions inaccessible (except in nursing and teaching), many women have turned to arenas where either the government is absent or has no effective control. In private sector, these women have begun to open their own businesses, publish their own magazines and books, direct their own movies, run their own enterprises, and develop their own unique trades. These women have achieved these skills and status in spite of all the restrictions imposed on their public presence. These women often reject the definition of their roles and status by the government, the opposition, and their husbands or parents. They express a desire to be master of their own destiny. In due time, the pressures generated by these women will break the patriarchal structure of gender relations in Iran and will give women a chance to achieve what they have worked for.

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Islamic Feminism
by Eric Hooglund

A muscular, tough-looking, and bearded man got clobbered on the head, back and shoulders by several women's purses when he tried to cut in line at a meat market in central Tehran on a sunny May morning. Other customers, mostly women who had been waiting patiently their turn in line, shouted insults as the embarrassed man sheepishly retreated to the end of the long queue. Several days later at Mehrabad airport, a diminutive female customs inspector reduced one large and loud bureaucrat to near tears as she insisted on looking at every single item in the luggage he thought should be exempted from examination on account of his official position. At a busy intersection in north Tehran, a college coed let everyone within hearing range know her low opinion of the manners and the manhood of a driver who had tried to edge her car out of a traffic lane. These incidents vividly illustrate that Iranian women, even though modestly covered in a socially acceptable version of Islamic hejab, or veiling, can be very assertive. Both their assertiveness and ubiquitous presence in public space starkly contradicts the Western stereotype of post-

Revolutionary Iranian women as being passive, chador clad, and confined to the home.

The reality of women's status and rights in Iran is complex. Western preoccupation with hejab, which views hejab as a symbol of women's repression, has tended to obscure real changes that have affected the social and economic role of most Iranian women since the 1979 Revolution. Most of these changes are the result of campaigning on the part of sincerely religious women who believe that an Islamic government has a responsibility to provide equal opportunities for men and women to serve society. They have had influential supporters. The late Ayatollah Khomeini actually encouraged women to become educated, and his daughter has been active, albeit in a low-key manner, with respect to some issues of concern to women. President Rafsanjani has appointed a woman to be a special advisor on women's affairs, and his daughter has been an enthusiastic promoter of government sponsored athletic facilities and competitive sports events for women. During the most recent Majlis elections in 1992, nine women won parliamentary seats. Some activist women in Iran refer to themselves as Islamic feminists. They view themselves as feminists in the sense that they are concerned with an array of women's issues and are committed to improving the status of women and expanding their rights, goals that they believe are fully compatible with a commitment to Islamic values. Islamic feminists do not have a problem with hejab, which they believe liberates women to participate in public without fear of harassment from men. Some Islamic feminists may wear the enveloping black chador that became famous when international media attention focused on Iran during the first year of its revolution, but more typically they wear over their
Although female employment has increased in urban areas and in the public sector, it has decreased in rural areas and in the private sector. Above, women in Rasht work in the Khazar Sorang factory packaging syringes.

clothes a head, shoulder and bodice covering called a maghna, which leaves the face and hands free. More rarely, they might wear the most ubiquitous and least restrictive form of hejab, a simple headscarf and ankle length, trench-style coat, which together fulfill the requirement that a woman cover her hair and flesh, except for the face and hands, whenever she appears in public space.

Islamic feminists acknowledge that they have a daunting task: to persuade a male-dominated political power structure that women’s rights are a legitimate concern for an Islamic government; and to convince thousands of secularized professional women, who tend to resent the imposition of hejab and generally believe the status of Iranian women has deteriorated since 1979, that they share similar goals and can cooperate in achieving them. One of the main fora for promoting their ideas is the magazine Zanan (Women), which has appeared bi-monthly since 1991. In fact, its editor, Shala Sherkat, unhesitatingly describes Zanan as the “first Islamic feminist magazine in Iran.” Many articles in the past four years have focused on working conditions for women. “Some 1.2 million women—10 percent of the urban labor force—work outside the home,” said Sherkat, “and thus we have published several well-researched studies on the prevalence of salary inequalities between men and women performing similar jobs, the difficulties of women employees obtaining professional promotions, the predominance of women in low-paid secretarial and factory jobs, and the invisible glass ceiling that limits opportunities for women to be appointed to key positions of authority.”

Zanan believes that job opportunities for women are closely linked to educational opportunities for women. “Right after the Revolution,” said Sherkat, “the government had an incorrect policy and tried to discourage women from all fields of study except teaching and women’s health. However, for the past five years, women have been able to study whatever they want and enter all jobs.” At least one article in each of the 23 issues of the magazine published to date has dealt with some aspect of women’s education, ranging from basic literacy to the challenges facing women students in Iran’s universities. Zanan also does not shy away from controversial topics. Its most recent issue (mid-May), which was sold out within two hours at news stands in central Tehran, featured a provocative article by Kazem Musavi that questioned the ease with which an Iranian man could divorce his wife. The same issue also published a lecture by Jaleh Shaditalab in which the author examined the cultural and social factors responsible for “the backwardness” of women. Past issues of Zanan featured articles dealing with topics like the condition of women in prisons; the stereotypes of women in primary school textbooks; and the representation of women in Iranian films.