

# Modernity, Islamization and Women in Iran

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**T**he 1979 Islamic Revolution was one of the most significant turning points in Iran and the Islamic world. The Shah was deposed despite his strong links to western powers such as the U.S. and Europe, and an Islamic fundamentalist government took over under the banner of anti-imperialism and anti-dictatorship. This became a time of joyous celebration not only for the majority of Iranians but for many Muslims as a whole. Many women took to the streets and upheld the *hijab* (veil) as a sign of revolt and opposition. But after the Islamic Republic took over, women empowerment took a dive and the "woman question" has been a burning issue ever since.

## AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Shortly after taking power,

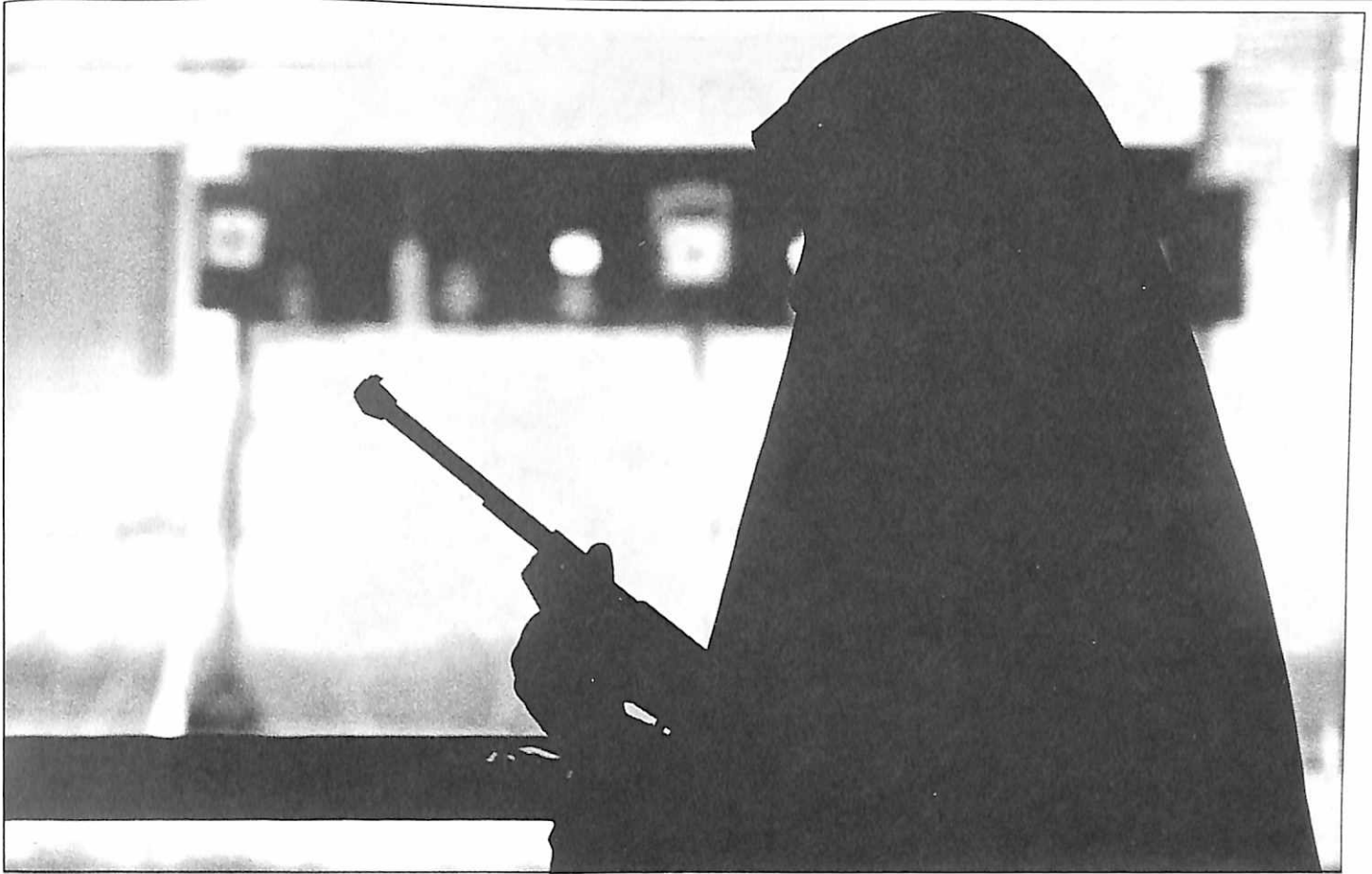
Khomeini's government overturned the Family Protection Acts of 1967 and 1975 which curbed some of men's unilateral rights. The *hijab* originally worn by conservative women and others as a sign of solidarity and anti-imperialism became mandatory for all women. The age of consent for girls was lowered from 18 to 13 and in some circumstances to nine. Polygamy was reinstated, as well as temporary marriages and unilateral divorce by men and custody of their children. Reproductive rights and sexuality were restricted, sex segregation was decreed in public areas, workplaces, schools, and universities and women were banned from areas of higher education such as law, agriculture, geology and archeology. A public campaign was launched tying women to maternal roles.

Those women who adhered to the "model of Islamic womanhood" and participated in the revolution gained status as bearers and maintainers of cultural heritage and religious values.<sup>1</sup> Khomeini frequently praised those women, calling them "the real teachers

of men in the noble movement of Islam" or the "the symbol of the actualization of Islamic ideals." In their attempt to monopolize state power and to counter the forces of their rival revolutionaries, as well as the forces of the Left secular modernist and reformist Islamists, fundamentalist clerics had to keep their women supporters politically active in the years after the revolution. This had been a turning point in the lives of those women who mostly had a marginal and secluded status and a traditional middle-class background. Of course, the official mobilization of women was intended to strengthen the Islamic state, not liberate women.

## ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

In modern Iran, the gap between infrastructure and superstructure had increasingly widened. Culture, value system, and attitudes lagged drastically behind the abrupt economic and material transitions. Structural incoherence widened the gap between "modern and traditional" sectors



Veiled and armed, women took their place in the resistance.

throughout society. The influence and penetration of Western advanced capitalism speeded up certain dimensions of development in Iran, but the totality of social transformation was impeded.

The exploitative characteristics of this process were resented and rejected by those Iranians who perceived modernization as simply imperialism in disguise. Those characteristics included a drastic and widening urban-rural gap, growing maldistribution of wealth and acute class polarization, over-reliance on petroleum and specialization in raw materials, political repression, bureaucratic corruption, societal disintegration and cultural lag.<sup>2</sup>

### RURAL WOMEN

Based on the traditional model of development, men were the primary target of absorption into industry and the mechanized farms. In spite of creating new job opportunities and the generation of income for a limited number of urban women, this model

of development further complicated the overall daily life and economic position of many women. With growing urbanization and rural-to-urban migration, their economic dependence on men increased.

“Modernization” failed to improve rural women’s status. The increasing economic dependence on men reinforced the traditional emphasis on early marriage for women and their primary roles as the bearers of sons. The illiteracy rate among rural women remained as high as 83 percent. In a study by Shahshani, the rural changes brought about through “development” had undermined the reciprocal economic ties and obligations in the rural family, including the balance between husbands and wives in terms of workload and labor productivity.

Following men’s migration, many women also had to abandon their village because of the heavy labor needed to farm and the inefficiency of tending small plots. These new

migrants, who usually ended up as seasonal laborers, peddlers, or small traders residing in slums, were among the first militant groups of the masses who joined Khomeini’s traditional middle-class supporters in the anti-Shah movement.

### URBAN WOMEN

During the decade preceding the 1979 revolution, urban women made impressive strides in education. In 1976, 43.4 percent of urban women (compared to 6.6 percent of rural women) were able to read and write. College enrollment for women from 1971 to 1978 increased to 79 percent.<sup>3</sup>

This pattern of change contributed to an unprecedented physical and social presence of women in the public sphere. In a culture that views women’s roles to be centered around marriage and motherhood, this emerging pattern of educated women threatened the traditional Muslim family structure and male domination. The increase in the number of young,



The veil was the strongest political statement against the Shah.

single women adopting a western lifestyle—unveiled, in modern dress, interacting publicly with men, in total contradiction with the patriarchal notions of honor and virginity—was perceived by the patriarchal mentality of many Muslim men as necessarily linked with *fitna*, that is, social and moral disorder.<sup>4</sup>

As economic class polarity widened among women, so did polarity between modern and traditional lifestyles. Women's visibility was also resented by many women. Among the urban middle class, two layers of women emerged, the *chadori* (veiled) women, representing the female folk of bazaar oriented (merchants, traders, artisans, shopkeepers), traditional and religious petty bourgeoisie who were basically housewives; and the *bee-chador* (unveiled) women, representing the modernized, educated females of the newly emerging *edaari*, the modern petty bourgeoisie who either worked outside the home or aspired to

employment.

#### **WOMEN AND ISLAMIC "FUNDAMENTALISM"**\*

The traditional woman came to be increasingly portrayed as old-fashioned, ignorant and irrelevant. On the other hand, the modern woman was said to be "Westoxicated", under the influence of Western toxic culture.

During the 1960s and 1970s, it was the better-educated, younger generation of the traditional layer who constituted the principal economic and ideological constituency of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. It was the women of this generation who first experienced the identity crisis. Exposed to higher education, dramatically different ideas and values, and an occasional chance of a teaching career, they were soon caught up in the midst of a double bond.<sup>5</sup> On one hand there was the traditional role prescribing marriage, motherhood, and domestic functions. But this role was

now regarded as old-fashioned. The other, modern role was seen as a Western import sanctioned by the Shah, which implied complicity with Western intruders, nonconformity to Islamic mores, and thus a susceptibility to "Westoxication".

Caught in a dilemma, these women began to seek an alternative role model. They found it in the opposition forces and intellectuals whose call was a "return to the roots", reaffirmation of the indigenous and authentic culture. Women students who sought salvation in the new Islamic movement adopted an alternative style of clothing called the *hijab-el-Islami* (Islamic cover), which consisted of a scarf covering the hair, a tunic over a long-sleeved shirt, loose pants (or stockings) and flat shoes—all in a dark or neutral color. This style of clothing, they argued, was neither so restrictive and traditional-looking as the *chador*, nor as exposing and objectifying as the Western dress. It did not

entail cosmetics and jewelry, thereby releasing women from excessive concern over looks, fashions and consumerism. More importantly, they believed it could enhance uniformity and reduce competition based on class and physical appearance. It promoted an asexual and serious image appropriate for political activism.

An additional reason worthy of attention here is the history of unveiling in contemporary Iran. Similar to such traditions as footbinding in China, the veil in Iran has been used to define a woman's physical mobility/boundary in society. The veil also signified the Muslim's perception of woman's sexuality as potentially subversive. It has reduced a woman's place and role to her sexual and reproductive dimensions. The veil has thus been a mechanism of patriarchal control, as well as a political device. According to the new Islamist discourse, the readoption of *hijab* has served to "vaccinate" women and men against the virus of Westoxication.

The clergy skillfully manipulated the revival of Islamic ideals and emotions. The clerical leadership as well as some Islamist women activists gradually enforced the adoption of the traditional veil (*chador*) as the most appropriate and politically strongest statement during the anti-Shah demonstrations. This served to convince some women and to intimidate many others that a refusal to wear the veil was not only un-Islamic but actually signified complicity with the Shah and the Western imperialists.

### THE POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF 'MOSTAZAAF' AND WOMEN

Islamist or Muslim fundamentalists usually defined the masses as *mostazaafin* (poor and disempowered) and the rich as *mostakbarin* (arrogant and powerful). Yet situating these terms within the political context of the time, they could not simply mean the poor versus the rich. For one, neither the pioneer fundamentalists, nor their primary

constituency (bazaar merchants and traditional petty bourgeoisie) represented the real poor or the lower class. The fundamentalist faction of the Islamic revivalists introduced these unconventional terms into the political rhetoric of the anti-Shah movement. They deliberately tried to replace the terms "oppression" and "exploitation" (known as part of the Left and Marxist vocabulary) with the vague notion of *mostazaaf* which actually blurred the economic dimensions of the conflict. The fundamentalist main concern seemed to be the Western cultural and ideological hegemony over Iranian society. The issues of control, supremacy, political power, and boundaries of identity were central to the discourse of the clerics who led the fundamentalist uprising.

The notion of *mostazaaf* actually projected the humiliated identity of the traditional segment of the middle class and most of all the clerics' own feeling of belittlement and weakening position in confrontation with the modernization measures. This concept was also used to retain control over the hearts and minds of the people, to protect their boundaries of influence from shrinking in areas of education, law, and media, and to reverse the shifting boundary of the women's role.

In short, Islamic Sharia, the deeply embedded system of religious law, male-biased Islamic precepts and traditional mechanisms like the veil, became conveniently meshed with political insecurity and psychological biases and fears forming an even stronger barrier against egalitarian changes in gender relations and family structure. In contrast, certain Islamic civil and commercial codes, as well as regulations concerning eating and consuming products have been modified or swept away with a bill or an Ayatollah's *fatwa* (decree).<sup>6</sup>

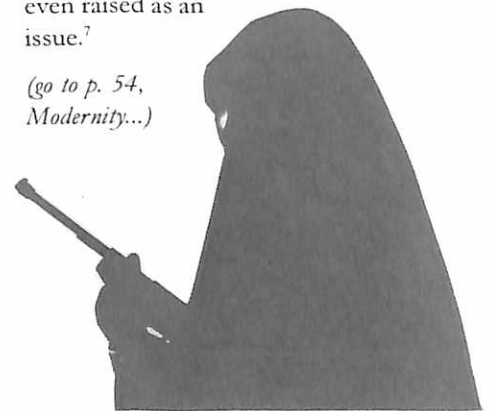
### HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY

Since the 19th century, it had always been the reformist intellectuals and forces opposing the monarch that

had pushed for modernization and social change, including women's rights. But by the time the Shah's American-instigated reforms started in 1961 (under the rubric of the "White Revolution"), it appeared that the Shah had taken over the banner of modernization and women's emancipation. The progressive intelligentsia, however, was unwilling to support his measures in the wake of increasing imperialistic influence and the Shah's dictatorship. While overlooking the reactionary nature of the clerics' opposition to the Shah's modernization, the intellectuals tried to focus their fight on the "external forces of imperialism" and the Shah as the lackey or the "internal base." That is part of the reason why the Left, and even Marxists, avoided ideological debates with the Islamic opposition over democratic issues like the woman question.

But this was not the first time that Iran's revolutionaries would not address the woman question. The Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) possessed a bourgeois-democratic character only in a limited sense, despite its progressive and revolutionary objectives. It failed to transform the economic and political foundations of society. Monarch despotism was not replaced by a constitutional representative democracy. The state and law were not secularized and laicized and the Islamist clergy retained their influence over the state. Despite their unprecedented participation in the movement, women's suffrage was not even raised as an issue.<sup>7</sup>

(go to p. 54,  
Modernity...)



*(Modernity..., continued from p. 41)*

Another failure of the Constitutional Movement that had significant ramifications for the woman question was the inability to rid Iran of neo-colonial penetration. As a result, semi-colonial obstacles hindered economic growth based on local capital accumulation and prevented the industrial sector from generating self-sustained growth and domestic decision-making centers.

Forty years later, between 1951 and 1953, Iranian nationalist and progressive forces mobilized people once more in an attempt to democratize the society, develop the economy, and strengthen the national industries. Led by the National Front and Mohammad Mossadeq, the Prime Minister, and with the massive participation of the people, including women, the movement sought nationalization of the oil industry (then under British control), restriction of the monarch's power, establishment of the rule of the law, and enforcement of the constitution and the parliament. However, an American-supported (CIA) coup against Mossadeq returned all power to the Shah, defeating this last promising attempt by Iranian democratic forces.

### **THE WOMAN QUESTION TODAY**

Despite the regressive policies and discriminatory attitudes of the Islamist government toward women, the present situation for Iranian women does not appear as gloomy as it did immediately after the revolution. Certain recent trends are encouraging and hopeful.

The attempt to impose an ideology of domesticity has not been successful despite the initial rhetoric.

Several factors have been offered to explain this: a discrepancy between preindustrial ideological prescriptions and the imperatives of capitalist development in Iran; the eight-year war with Iraq; economic need on the part of some women and resistance to total subjection on the part of others (especially educated women with

previous work experience); and the ambiguities in the discourse and policies of the Islamist political elite and the conflicting cultural images of women. These factors have allowed women to participate in the formal economy and to maneuver within the confines of the Islamic system.<sup>8</sup> Another factor to be added is the enormous brain drain (mostly men) which has left the regime short of skilled and professional "manpower",

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thus creating a need for the available women professionals.

Another significant factor which has shaped women's status in post-revolutionary Iran has been the growing feminist consciousness and the increasing resistance of both Islamic and secular women against the violations of their rights by the clerical authorities. Relative to the extent of sexist discrimination in present Iran, women have shown a remarkable degree of resilience in maintaining their social presence and agency. The most ironic and unexpected feature of this growing gender-related activism has been the important role of the Islamic women in the reformation of women's rights in an Islamic context. These reformers originally constituted the traditional middle class and ardent supporters of the Islamic Revolution. However, thanks to their social praxis and political engagement during the revolutionary years, their rising

consciousness and increasing expectations went beyond a clerical or male controlled veiled constituency. The discrepancy between the promised ideals of a just Islamic society and the unjust reality of the Islamic Republic led to a reformist approach and growing activism among the Muslim women who are pushing for reform within an Islamic framework, tentatively called "Islamic feminism".

This trend of Islamic reform constitutes a diverse spectrum, including a sort of moderate state feminists, liberal pragmatists, and independent "radicals" who promote egalitarian and feminist ideas to various degrees. Most of the leading figures among the new Islamic women elite (such as Faezeh and Fatemeh Hashemi, two activist daughters of the President) have been associated with men in state power, representing therefore a state oriented top-down reform agenda. Yet, certain independent strands of Muslim feminism (like the one advocated by the monthly journal, *Zanaan*, published in Tehran) represents a more genuinely egalitarian, democratic and inclusive approach. These reform-minded women have been influential in the recent small yet positive changes in marriage and family law which provide some restrictions against men's unilateral rights to divorce, child custody, and polygamy similar to those of the Pahlavi state's Family Protection Act.

In the 1980s there were four women out of 286 members in Parliament, but since 1992 nine women were elected, some of them quite vocal in raising women issues and in criticizing government policies. They have successfully intervened in areas such as family and education. It is encouraging to note that the size and popularity of the conservative and extremist Islamist factions opposing women's rights in Iran is shrinking. Strong evidence for this lies in the fascinating, yet less noticed gender dimension of the last (March-April 1996) parliamentary elections and the

more obvious role of women in the surprising victory of the modernist and progressive candidate in the recent presidential elections (May 1997). Given the structural confines of the present theocratic regime and the influence of the conservative Islamists inside and outside the state apparatus, the success of the newly elected president in implementing his relatively more egalitarian and progressive programs remains to be seen.

Predictably, these reform-minded women have to grapple with ideological contradictions and conflicts with Quranic injunctions. But their potential for success among many young and old women, the new challenges that they bring into the feminist discourse, and their prospective impact on the woman question in Iran have already become subject for recent studies, debates, and theorizing among feminist scholars of Muslim societies. Some socialist-feminists have already suggested exploring possibilities for dialogue, and strategies of issue-oriented coalitions between Islamic and secular feminists.<sup>9</sup> There has been increasing levels of collaborative efforts between Islamic and secular feminists in recent years. Yet, the extent of religious repression on the one hand and the undemocratic, sectarian, and exclusionary approach on the part of some secular left as well as many Muslim women activists on the other have prevented any large scale rapprochement. Certain versions of Islamic feminism, if at all, are based on an essentialistic approach emphasizing gender differences.

Some scholars have endorsed Islamist "veiled activism" in countries like Egypt as feminist, "dignifying" and "humanizing" to women.<sup>10</sup> But one should distinguish between women who "choose" it as a mechanism to participate in social and political life, and those in power who impose the veil on women to impart a uniform Islamic identity and utilize a controlled female activism in achieving the political consolidation of a totalitarian state power. It is important to

emphasize here that any reformist interpretation or subversive reconstruction efforts towards women's rights within a religious framework (Islamic or otherwise) should be considered not as an alternative or substitute to secular and laic demands but as a component of a more holistic social change.<sup>11</sup>

In common with women in many other Muslim countries, the most difficult challenge for Iranian feminists is to maintain a delicate balance between reclaiming a national identity and reaffirming progressive elements in the development of society. This would have to be a society that moves beyond both neocolonial subordination and regressive traditions by subscribing to women's liberation and gender equality. ♪

\**Endnote:* It is only for the lack of a better term that I use the terms "fundamentalism and Islamism" despite my awareness of their problems I use these terms in reference to new political movements that use religion as their main ideological framework or basis of identity.

#### Notes

1. YY Haddad and E B Lindley (eds.) *Women, Religion and Social Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p.275
2. W Ogburn, *On Culture and Social Change* (University of Chicago Press, 1964).
3. Estimate is based on 'Statistics of the Ministry of Higher Education of Iran: Center for Educational Planning' (in Persian) (Tehran 1984). See also G. Mehran, 'The Education of a New Muslim Woman in Postrevolutionary Iran', paper presented at the VIIth World Congress of Comparative Education, Montreal, Canada (1989).
4. E. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil, Male-Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (revised edition) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
5. N. Tohidi, 'Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran', in C. T. Mohanty, A Russo and L. Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
6. For example, usury and any practice of lending money with an interest charge (*rebbh*) is prohibited in Islam. Thus, by principle, there should be an ideological barrier against banking and financial capitalism in

an Islamic government. In practice, however, by a virtual stroke of the pen of the ayatollahs, the interest charged by the Iranian banks has been pronounced as legitimate commission or service fee.

7. The issue of women's suffrage was raised once during the Majlis debates with vehement opposition from the clergy. See Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

8. See V. Moghadam, 'Women, Work and Ideology in the Islamic Republic', pp. 221-243 in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20 (1988), p.221.

9. Yeganeh, op.cit., and Moghadam, op. cit. (1988).

Tohidi, Nayerch, "Conclusion: 'The Issues at Hand'" in H. Bodman & N. Tohidi (EDS.) *Diversity Within Unity: Gender Dynamics and Change in Muslim Societies*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997

10. F. El Guindi, 'Veiled Activism: Egyptian Women in the Contemporary Islamic Movement', *Femmes de la Mediterranee Peuples/Mediterraneens* 22-23 (January-June 1983).

11. See Kar, Mehranguiz, interviewed by Homa Hoodafar in *Middle East Report*, (January-March, 1996), 38.

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