
July 2018

“The Source of Change Within Society”: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women’s Movements

Andre Vogel
Brown University, andre_vogel@brown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc>

Recommended Citation

Vogel, Andre (2018) “The Source of Change Within Society”: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women’s Movements,” *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc/vol2/iss4/2>

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

The politics of gender have dominated Western conversation concerning Iran since the Islamic Republic's founding more than three decades ago. In the West, one regularly discovers articles¹ lamenting the apparent slide backwards that the Islamic Republic has taken with regards to women's rights. Certainly, contemporary life for Iranian women is problematic. However, as Leila Abu-Lughod has noted, obsessive focus on the symbolic markers of women's oppression (often clothing) in the Middle East tends to lead one into an Orientalist and essentialist trap that wipes away any understanding of Iranian women's agency in their own lives: "Is it not a gross violation of women's own understandings of what they are doing to simply denounce the burqa as a medieval imposition?"²

In reality, Iranian women, from the early twentieth century to the years following the 1979 revolution, have interacted with state and society in varied, complex ways, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully, in an attempt to achieve gender equality. In this paper, then, I will examine the history of women's movements in Iran. I will first focus on pre-revolutionary history. Through the lens of three major events, the Tobacco Boycott and Constitutional Revolution, Reza Shah's 1936 unveiling law, and Mohammed Reza Shah's 1963 White Revolution, I will demonstrate how the use of a Western, secular, humanist discourse surrounding female emancipation both failed to provide legitimate gender equality and served to reinforce clerical and traditional views of women's emancipation as dangerous to the fabric of Iranian society. I will then examine the Islamic revolution and its aftermaths. Specifically, I will show that Islamist revolutionaries moralized women's political participation in the public sphere and thus allowed Islamist women, in the decades following the revolution, to develop an emancipatory framework that is founded in a feminist exegesis of the Quran; what is known as Islamic feminism.

The history of modern women's action in Iran begins with the Tobacco Boycott of 1890 and ensuing Constitutional Revolution. In both cases women proved invaluable, lending concrete physical support to the boycott and the constitutional movement. Unfortunately, the Constitutional Revolution also marked the beginning of a construction, in the Iranian national consciousness, of both women's emancipation and female political participation as immoral, corrupting, and Western. This construction was further reinforced during the Pahlavi dynasty, when programs of rapid modernization and Westernization, in which the appearance of gender equality was considered critical, were instituted.

The Pahlavis introduced two legal packages, the 1936 unveiling law and 1963 White Revolution, which, superficially, attempted to allow space for women to integrate into, and engage with, the public political sphere. Ultimately, though,

¹ <http://www.boredpanda.com/iranian-women-fashion-1970-before-islamic-revolution-iran/>

² Abug-Lughod, 785

the laws failed to achieve their stated aim. Women's emancipation, as a component of the Pahlavis' plan for Westernization and modernization, was derided as immoral and dangerous to Iranian society. The problem, as I identify in this paper, was primarily discursive: the Pahlavi dynasty and those women activists who worked within its institutional confines made use of a modern, Western mode of discourse, which could not adequately challenge the traditional, Islamic discourse of the clerical establishment and those who opposed women's emancipation. This changed quite drastically during the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The revolution, in which female revolutionaries were lionized by the highest religious figures, opened the doors of Islamic discourse to women; especially with regards to women's rights and female emancipation. Certain women, after the revolution, made use of the new, Islamic mode of discourse to push for and develop what some scholars have called Islamic Feminism, that is: "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic Paradigm".³ They have made use of classic, Islamic, theological tools, such as *ijtihad*, or interpretation, to reinterpret and reclaim Islam and Quranic verses as feminist.

From the Tobacco Boycott of 1890 until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women on the front lines of progressive social and political movements aimed at securing gender equality and developing a feminist consciousness. These movements took the form of mass protests, in the case of the Tobacco Boycott and Constitutional Revolution or top-down political action, in the case of the 1936 unveiling laws and 1963 White Revolution. These movements, whether broad-based or top-down, attempted to institute a secular, humanist, and, most importantly, Western interpretation of gender equality. Unfortunately, the use of a Western, secular, humanist discourse surrounding female emancipation both failed to provide legitimate gender equality and served to reinforce clerical and traditionalist views of women's emancipation as dangerous to the very fabric of Iranian society.

Several of the ideas outlined above are rather slippery and, for the purposes of this paper, will require more nuanced and in-depth definitions, namely: my delineation of *legitimate* equality and the broader idea of a Western, secular, feminist politics. First, I consider a legitimate policy of gender equality to be one that is both legal (i.e. enshrined in law) and reflected, or visible, within broader society. Thus, a movement which advocates for gender equality and which may be supported by a majority of people is illegitimate if it does not rest on a political and legal foundation of equality; that is, if legal code does not support gender equality. Conversely, if a legal and political movement is not supported in society at large, it too is illegitimate. This is not meant as a critique

³ Ahmadi, 35

of attempts to build gender equality either through law or through social movements; rather, as will shortly become clear, it is a necessary definition in understanding the history and development of feminist consciousness in Iran.

Secondly, a Western, secular feminist discourse is one that takes a humanist approach in justifying female empowerment and gender equality. This approach takes as self-evident that women and men deserve equal treatment and are equally capable of participating in society; it was forcefully articulated by Zayneb Pasha, a female leader in the Tobacco Boycott of 1890: “If you men do not have the courage to punish the oppressors...wear our veil and go home. Do not claim to be men; we will fight instead of you”.⁴ That is, if men are unable to accomplish the necessary goals of fighting tyranny they should allow women to take charge because women are equally capable; men and women are intrinsically equal.

Returning to Iran, in 1890 the Shah of Iran at the time, Nasser al-Din, granted a concession over all Iranian tobacco to Great Britain, which led to widespread protests that cut across social, class, and gender lines within the country. Despite attempts to keep them a secret, word of the concessions got out to the general public and, supported in part by edicts from clergy and leaders outside Iran, a broad swath of the Iranian public took to the streets in protest. The protests were unprecedented but not unexpected: Western business had been encroaching into the Iranian economy for some time. While these encroachments sometimes brought prosperity to Iranian businessmen, they more often transformed traditional economic structures and ruined native industries.⁵ Quite naturally, then, Western intrusion into the Iranian economic sphere was met with anger and resentment, which quickly evolved into a broader rejection of Western philosophical and social values, including women’s emancipation.

Women played a key role in the Tobacco protests; when the protests first erupted, women immediately joined in, marching in organized lines at the front of the crowds.⁶ As the protests evolved into a general boycott on the consumption and sale of tobacco, women’s groups, known as *anjomans*, turned militant. They armed themselves with “rifles, clubs, and bags full of rocks, hidden under their black chadors”⁷ and attacked merchants and soldiers who refused to support the boycott. Surprisingly, even the Shah’s wives “stood in solidarity with ordinary Iranians in boycotting tobacco”.⁸ Faced with opposition from all sides of society, the Shah had little choice but to cancel the tobacco concession—Iranians and, especially, Iranian women had been successful. In leading protests; in militantly

⁴ Vakil, 27

⁵ Paidar, 43

⁶ Derayeh, 111

⁷ Derayeh, 111

⁸ Vakil, 27

upholding the boycott, Iranian women recognized the power they held to effect change. The Iranian women on the front lines of the Tobacco Boycott represented a burgeoning understanding of women's social and political strength; a growth in feminist consciousness in Iran. Understandably, women soon acted upon this consciousness to advocate for domestic political change during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911.

With the success of the Tobacco Boycott grew a greater nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment, culminating in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, in which women, once again, fought on the front lines. Initially, as with the Tobacco Boycott, *anjomans* joined forces with members of disparate social classes to push for the general goals of constitutionalism, checks and balances, and an Iranian society free of despotism. As the revolution proceeded, though, militant *anjomans*, reminiscent of those in of the Tobacco Boycott, took up arms in support of the movement. Some "took up clubs and acted as bodyguards"⁹ for prominent clergy members who supported the constitution, while others went so far as to enter government buildings with revolvers and threaten to "kill their own husbands and sons and leave behind their own dead bodies"¹⁰ if constitutionalism was not enacted. As in the Tobacco Boycotts, the Shah was forced to concede: in 1906, a constitution was drafted that severely curtailed the monarch's power. It would seem that women had again successfully demonstrated their collective ability to enact political change. Unfortunately, while women who had fought and died for the constitutionalist cause were honored as "martyrs of freedom",¹¹ female participation in the revolution was not materially rewarded: the constitution "completely ignored and omitted rights for women";¹² they were barred from voting, from running for office, even from acquiring education. Constitutionalist women were incensed: women "did not take part in the Revolution to have their rights trampled upon".¹³

Despite their anger, in the years following the revolution, as disagreements over constitutionalism and the future of the country evolved into an outright civil war, women remained explicitly nationalist and constitutionalist. Women financed, supported, and again took up arms for the constitutionalist cause, for the most part without crossing into expressly emancipatory territory. Those who did practice an emancipatory politics, who advocated for the radical ideals of women's education, women's suffrage, or release from veiling laws, were castigated. In one particularly memorable moment, a group of women took to the streets of Tehran shouting pro-constitutional slogans and removing their *chadors*.

⁹ Derayeh, 114

¹⁰ Vakil, 27

¹¹ Paidar, 57

¹² Derayeh, 115

¹³ Paidar, 55

Their actions immediately resulted in public indignation: the anti-veil protestors were condemned, even by other constitutionalist women; their actions derided as those of “a bunch of prostitutes”.¹⁴ Thus, while women were celebrated as “martyrs of freedom” while strictly fighting for a patriarchal constitution, they were castigated, pilloried as immoral prostitutes, and dismissed the moment they began to advocate for a personal emancipation.

The failure of the Constitutional Revolution to achieve legitimate gender equality was primarily one of differing discourses: radical *anjomans* had pushed for equality through humanist arguments, by declaring that women were intrinsically able to “correct the law... and appoint governors... [and] destroy the roots of tyranny and oppression”¹⁵, but opposition relied on religious and Islamic arguments to outline the impossibility of such equality. Arguments against women’s rights were presented by clerics who argued that “God had not given them [women] the capacity needed for taking part in politics”.¹⁶ In the cultural and discursive environment of the time, defined by a growing distrust of *all* Western ideals due to Western economic disruption in the previous decades, the traditional, religious argument was stronger than the humanist one: women’s place in Iranian society was ordained by God himself. The Constitutional Revolution and its aftermath demonstrated the inadequacy of humanist approaches to achieving gender equality in Iran; there was simply no way to develop a broad-based, modern, secular movement for women’s rights in the face of popular opposition that viewed female emancipators as “prostitutes”; that considered all emancipatory action the result of a “conspiracy of ‘morally corrupt’ Westernized intellectuals”¹⁷, as one cleric put it, to destroy Iranian society. Despite this failure, future emancipatory action remained situated within a Western, secular discourse. However, further attempts, as in 1936, to develop women’s emancipation within such a Western discourse were resoundingly rejected by the traditional and clerical classes.

In 1936, Reza Shah unilaterally banned the use of the veil. The ban was delivered as part of a broader push towards a Western modernity, as such the policy failed to secure legitimate female emancipation and, in fact, isolated a large segment of Iranian women from society while further constructing women’s emancipation as Western and immoral.

From the outset of his rule, Reza Shah maintained a strict policy of nation building and modernization that was built on a specific conception of modernity that held as paramount the “imitation of certain aspects of Western societies”.¹⁸

¹⁴ Paidar, 59

¹⁵ Derayeh, 115

¹⁶ Wakil, 29

¹⁷ Paidar, 67

¹⁸ Paidar, 81

To that end, taxes were imposed, railroads and factories were built, and the military was greatly expanded. With regards to women, the Shah believed the visible entrance of women into the public sphere was “a hallmark of modernization”.¹⁹ Following a trip to Turkey in the early 1930s, where Ataturk had already banned *hijab*, the Shah unilaterally barred the use of the veil among Iranian women and ordered them to dress in “Western-style clothing”.²⁰ The policy was militantly enforced: women who ventured outside wearing a veil were liable to be attacked and forcibly disrobed by police.²¹

While the policy could be construed as an attempt to emancipate women, this was belied by the Shah’s decision to, at the time of the law’s passage, dismantle all independent women’s organizations, women’s magazines, and women’s newspapers that existed in Iran.²² The unveiling policy was enacted strictly to force a rapid Westernization of Iran, not emancipate Women. Although the Shah’s new policy was supported by some middle and upper-class women, leaving the house unveiled was, for the many lower-class and religious women who had been socialized to accept the veil as natural, akin to going out naked.²³ Facing state violence if they disobeyed, following Reza Shah’s decree many of these religious women simply refused to leave their homes. While the Shah’s unveiling policy was, in theory, aimed at drawing women visibly into the public sphere, in practice it did the exact opposite. Furthermore, the law underscored and reinforced the general feeling that the West was the source of moral decay in Iran. A cleric named Ruhollah Khomeini best put feeling into words: “the dishonorable act of unveiling... inflicted moral and material damage on our country and is forbidden by the law of God and the Prophet”.²⁴ The 1936 law, then, did two things: first, the Shah’s dismantlement of female civic society and the women’s spaces compounded with the social reality of Iran at the time, where the veil was understood as natural, moral, and religious, led to the exclusion of a large majority of Iranian women from the public sphere. Second, the law reinforced underlying assumptions about the immorality of the West and the connection between such immorality and women’s emancipation. It did not achieve legitimate gender equality. The law’s failure can be read as a failure of Western-style humanism to justify the perceived immorality of unveiling; that is, the law failed precisely because it imitated Western norms. A similar pattern emerged in later years, as Reza Shah’s son, Mohammed Reza Shah, pursued female suffrage in 1963.

¹⁹ Keddie, 100

²⁰ Keddie, 100

²¹ Keddie, 100

²² Paidar, 102

²³ Keddie, 100

²⁴ Paidar, 121

In the years following the 1936 unveiling law, Iran was wracked by various political and social events: World War Two brought foreign dominance to Iran; Reza Shah was deposed, his son, Mohammed Reza Shah, was installed; the early fifties saw the rise of a truly populist, democratic nationalist in the form of Mohammed Mossadeq, who was promptly ousted by a cadre of royalists and CIA agents. In the wake of the Mossadeq affair, Mohammed Reza Shah began to consolidate his own political power, developing a brutal internal intelligence service, SAVAK, and tightening his grip over Iran. Mohammed Reza Shah also worked to extend his father's program of Western-style modernization, and in 1963 instituted a series of reforms, known as the White Revolution, which included female suffrage among its provisions.²⁵

The 1963 White Revolution was, without a doubt, a deeply significant moment for women's history in Iran. The legal gains made through the Revolution represented a leap forward in terms of women's political and legal recognition in Iran. This said, despite the Revolution's positive effects, the enactment of female suffrage failed to alter social conceptions of women's emancipation as an immoral encroachment by the West into Iranian society.

In January 1963, specifically in response to American "reform pressures"²⁶, Mohammed Reza Shah announced that he would put to referendum a six-point program of social reform, entitled the White Revolution, which included the extension of the right to vote to women. The Pahlavi government's connection to the United States was well recognized in Iran at the time.²⁷ Unsurprisingly then, the clerical establishment was vehemently opposed to the White Revolution and the referendum, calling its supporters "the enemies of Islam",²⁸ yet again invoking a connection between Westernization and destruction of traditional, Islamic society. Clerical opposition was, ostensibly, tied to issues of dictatorship and "subservience to Western Powers".²⁹ However, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the importance of women's suffrage as a point of contention among Iranian clerics at the time: just a year before the Revolution was launched, Ruhollah Khomeini had privately warned the prime minister that "the franchise of women... is contrary to Islam".³⁰ Despite the opposition, the referendum, "like most such referendums"³¹ at the time, passed with a massive majority.³²

²⁵ See Axworthy for a general history of pre-revolutionary Iran.

²⁶ Keddie, 144

²⁷ Keddie, 144

²⁸ Paidar, 145

²⁹ Keddie, 146

³⁰ Paidar, 143

³¹ Keddie, 145

³² Derayeh, 150

The rather explicit merging of subservience to the United States and women's suffrage incensed the religious and traditional sectors of society. In a further response to the passage of the White Revolution, Khomeini began to preach against the Shah, instigating a protest movement that "included thousands of clergy, shopkeepers, office workers, teachers and students".³³ The Pahlavi regime responded violently, leading to the death of hundreds of individuals.³⁴ While it was claimed that a majority of Iranians supported the White Revolution, a sizable and broad swath of society, clearly, did not. The discourse of modernization that the Pahlavi regime championed, once again, was unable to engender public support or challenge religious discourse that held women's suffrage to be "contrary to Islam". Thus, while the White Revolution did secure women's suffrage, it did so at the cost of alienating large amounts of the population and cementing the connection between women's emancipation, immorality, and the West in the minds of ordinary Iranians.

By the waning years of the Pahlavi dynasty, political action had failed to achieve wide social acceptance of women's emancipation or legitimate social equality. These failures were primarily discursive: Iranian women's action had been structured within a secular, humanist discourse, inimical to traditional society, which was further compounded by the efforts of the Pahlavis elder and junior to tie female emancipation to their program of modernization and Westernization. Specifically, the 1936 unveiling law and 1963 White Revolution both used women's emancipation as a tool towards greater Westernization of society. Thus, in a sort of self-perpetuating cycle, emancipatory political action under the Pahlavis failed to create legitimate equality because it was considered intimately tied to the West and at the same time served to further the conception of emancipation as corrupting, immoral, and Western. This concept was perhaps best captured by Jal Ale-Ahmad's popular and influential essay, *Gharbzadegi*, which viewed the end-result of the Pahlavis' emancipatory politics as the *gharbzadegi*, or Westoxicated, woman: a "super-consumerist" who was a "propagator of the corrupt culture of the West"; a culture which was actively "undermining the moral fabric of society".³⁵ But, precisely because the clerical establishment saw the Pahlavi-supported emancipation of women as immoral and dangerous, when the opportunity arose for revolutionary action, Islamists chose to champion the cause of "true" women's rights, dramatically altering the valence of women's political action during and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In 1978, widespread, anti-Shah protests erupted across Iran. The protests, which quickly evolved into a full-scale revolution, involved the large and active

³³ Paidar, 146

³⁴ Keddie, 147

³⁵ Paidar 213

participation of women. In fact, up to a third of the demonstrators in the revolution were women;³⁶ a figure made more impressive by the fact that many of the demonstrations and protests numbered in the millions.³⁷ While leadership of the revolutionary movement was confined, generally, to radical, Islamist, men, like Khomeini (who had, by the time of the revolution, come to be known as Ayatollah Khomeini) women were free to participate in any other aspects of the struggle that they wished to take up. Women took part in both peaceful and violent protests; dug trenches, fought in street battles; and joined guerrilla movements, strikes, and boycotts.³⁸ Perhaps most importantly, women acted as a motivational foundation to the greater revolutionary movement: supporting friends and family; working as doctors and nurses; cooking; and spreading “oppositional literature and tapes”.³⁹ Women, from the start of the revolution, were active in nearly all levels of the public landscape of protests and demonstrations.

As the revolution continued, women’s participation increasingly came to represent an Islamist view. This happened for two reasons. First, as the revolutions proceeded, “those opposed to the shah’s regime increasingly saw as bad everything the regime saw as good”.⁴⁰ The regime had long championed secularism, Westernization, and modernization; logically, to register opposition to the regime and its immoral politics, women chose to embrace Islam and traditionalism. Second, secular, leftist, or otherwise moderate revolutionary elements refused to take up the question of women’s rights “because of its association with the policies of the Shah’s regime”.⁴¹ But radical, Islamist elements, precisely because they considered women to be “victims of the Shah’s [immoral] regime”,⁴² believed they had the duty of advancing women’s *true* interests. Islamists explicitly pointed to “women as the source of change within society”.⁴³ Thus, women increasingly chose to don the *chador* and *hijab*,⁴⁴ which became the physical symbol of the rejection of Pahlavi values, in effect transforming religious garb into powerful, anti-Shah political symbols. Female activists during the revolution, then, were both voicing anger with the Western, corrupting, and immoral gender policies of the Shah and pragmatically aligning themselves with the only revolutionary elements, Islamists, who promised to further women’s rights and gender equality.

³⁶ Halper, 104

³⁷ Keddie, 231

³⁸ Paidar, 211

³⁹ Paidar, 212

⁴⁰ Keddie, 229

⁴¹ Paidar, 210

⁴² Paidar, 218

⁴³ Paidar, 210

⁴⁴ Keddie, 230

The result of the alignment between Islamists and women was profound: women were lionized and their political participation sanctioned as divinely moral by the highest organs of the Shii'a establishment. Islamist leaders unconditionally approved of women's participation in the revolution; Khomeini called women's involvement "one of the blessings of [the revolutionary] movement",⁴⁵ and exclaimed that women were serving the revolutionary cause in a manner that exceeded that of men.⁴⁶ The Islamists transformed female political action from its pre-revolutionary construction as Western and immoral, into a decidedly moral, Islamic act. The effects were immediately obvious: during the revolution, large numbers of women "disobey[ed] their husbands and fathers on political grounds",⁴⁷ left the house, and felt able to mix and demonstrate politically alongside revolutionary men. The reconstruction of female political action as moral, though, had much farther reaching consequences: it allowed women to challenge gender oppression within a discourse that the new, post-revolutionary Islamic Republic had to engage with; that is, sanctification of women's political action as Islamic meant that emancipatory women, unlike in the Pahlavi days, could access a religious and traditional discourse that resonated with the population and government and which could not be brushed aside as Western or corrupt: women's political action was, as Khomeini had decreed during the revolution, entirely moral.

Immediately following the ouster of the Shah, Khomeini and other Islamists carefully purged the new Republic of all secular opposition. In a series of impressive political moves, Khomeini took power; clerics, for the first time, were in control of both the religious and political establishments of Iran. Paradoxically, the result of clerical control over political structures was the creation of a constitution that represented a "total reversal of the history of clerical opposition to women's participation in the economy, politics and society".⁴⁸ In order to retain the large, female support it had enjoyed during the revolution, the new Islamist regime enshrined women's right to political participation in the Islamic republic. However, within several years the regime's professed commitments to gender equality were severely curtailed.

Immediately following the institution of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the new government walked back its apparent commitment to women during the revolution, instituting mandatory *hijab*; purging secular women from government; and reinstating *shari'a* with regards to family law.⁴⁹ The new regime, though,

⁴⁵ Halper, 108

⁴⁶ Halper, 107

⁴⁷ Paidar, 218

⁴⁸ Paidar, 257

⁴⁹ Halper, 110

had, in the constitution, enshrined women's right to political participation; Khomeini could not ignore the legal and moral space women now occupied in the public, political sphere. Thus, Islamist women, faced with the regressive gender policies which the Islamic Republic was championing, were able to engage the religious establishment of the state in dialogue, presenting "female-centered interpretations of Islam";⁵⁰ advocating for woman-friendly laws. The state, in order to remain credible as both the political and religious supremacy in Iran, had to respond; cite authoritative religious and legal sources; offer rationalizations and proofs.⁵¹ In doing so, the state and Islamist women created what legal scholar Louise Halper calls a "process of public engagement"⁵², a national dialogue with which the Islamist regime was required to engage in order to remain credible as a religious and political authority. This national dialogue further legitimized the political actions of Islamist women.

The result of this public engagement was a slew of successes for Iranian women. Due to the political agitation of Islamist women, by the early 1990s, "restrictive barriers to women's educational achievement and their employment were removed";⁵³ regressive family laws were repealed; and, surpassing any laws of the Pahlavi regime, a new law to compensate divorced wives for housework, was passed.⁵⁴ Bolstered by their political successes, Islamist women in the early nineties began to build a formalized, feminist exegesis of the Quran.

Islamist women, making use of the moralized space that the Islamic Revolution opened for female political actors, built a movement that can be described as "Islamic feminist"⁵⁵. This movement was primarily promulgated through a single female publication: *Zanan*, a popular women's magazine.⁵⁶ *Zanan* hosted a mix of articles concerning "religion, culture, law, and education",⁵⁷ but by far the most important topic it has covered with regards to feminism is that of *ijtihad*, independent reasoning and the right to reinterpretation of the Quran. Islamic feminists rely on *ijtihad*, a common practice among Shi'a mullahs, to advance a "feminist rereading of the sacred texts".⁵⁸ In doing so, Islamic feminists draw upon the explicitly religious and moralized public space that the revolution created, engaging with the discourse of Islam that the revolution brought to Iran. More importantly, though, reinterpretation of the Quran represents a radical reclaiming of what was once a system of oppression. In

⁵⁰ Halper, 112

⁵¹ Halper, 120

⁵² Halper, 120

⁵³ Moghadam, 1140

⁵⁴ Halper, 100

⁵⁵ Moghadam, 1140

⁵⁶ Moghadam, 1144

⁵⁷ Moghadam, 1144

⁵⁸ Ahmadi, 36

reclaiming the Quran, Islamic feminists assert the goals and needs of women in Iran while also remaining within the bounds of their faith. Islamic feminism, then, is both a rejection of the Western values, so despised during the Pahlavi years, and a rejection of Orientalist constructions of the Islamic woman as utterly oppressed and lacking agency. It is an entirely indigenous form of feminism, owned and articulated by Iranian women.

Beginning with the Tobacco Boycott and Constitutional Revolution of 1905 until the early 1990s, women and the politics of gender have been on the forefront of the Iranian national consciousness. In the Tobacco Boycott and Constitutional Revolution, women first demonstrated political and organizational power. Unfortunately, the two events also catalyzed clerical opposition to women's rights as an immoral and corrupting Western influence that had no place in Iran. Thus, despite their valiant efforts, women were not given an equal treatment in the constitution of 1906. Further efforts to emancipate women came as part of a state-controlled march towards Western modernity during the Pahlavi dynasty. Both Pahlavis, elder and junior, believed that the appearance of women's emancipation was necessary in order to achieve a desired, Western modernity in Iran. However, Reza Shah Pahlavi's unveiling law served to alienate the vast majority of Iranian women, as well the country's clerical establishment, from the regime's goal of Western modernity, while concurrently dismantling all arms of the independent women's movement in the country—isolating women in their homes and barring them from public participation. Likewise, Mohammed Reza Shah's 1963 White Revolution, of which women's suffrage was a crucial component, brought harsh clerical opposition, in part due to the widely understood catalysis of the White Revolution from Western pressure. The end result of the Pahlavi attempts at modernization was both the construction in the public imaginary of the Westoxicated⁵⁹ woman, a corrupt woman who was destroying the moral and material fabric of Iranian society, and the galvanization of the clerical establishment to redefine women's political participation in Islamic terms during the 1979 revolution.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 opened new allowed women to engage with traditional Iran within a common, religious discourse. During the revolution, women's political participation was encouraged by Islamist revolutionaries. Despite earlier opposition to women's suffrage and political participation, during the revolution clerical leaders sanctioned female participation as moral and divine. After the revolution, the Islamic government had to engage with religious, political women precisely because it had already approved of their political identities. Thus, in the face of the eradication of protective laws, women were

⁵⁹ Paidar, 213

able to advocate for themselves and push through procedural and legal changes that afforded them rights equal to those under the Shah by 1992.

The lionization and approval of women's political and religious action in post-revolutionary Iran allowed some women to engage in a constructive reinterpretation of the Quran throughout the early 1990s. This new, feminist exegesis posited that the Quran is a living text, which can and should be understood through a temporal lens, allowing for the development of what some scholars have called an "Islamic feminism", or a feminism that holds as crucial its connection to religion.

Sources:

Abu-Lughod, Leila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 783–90.

Ahmadi, Fereshteh. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (December 13, 2006): 33–53.

Axworthy, Michael. *Revolutionary Iran*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Derayeh, Minoo. *Gender Equality in Iranian History: From Pre-Islamic Times to the Present*. Edwin Mellon Press, 2006.

Halper, Louise. "Law and Women's Agency in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 28, no. 85 (2005): 85–142.

"How Iranian Women Dressed In The 1970s Revealed In Old Magazines." *Bored Panda*. Accessed December 7, 2016. <http://www.boredpanda.com/iranian-women-fashion-1970-before-islamic-revolution-iran/>.

Keddie, Nikki R. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press, 2006.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of Teh Debate." *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 1135–71.

Paidar, Parvin. *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Vakil, Sanam. *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*. The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.