Reconstructing the Society: Iranian Women's Movement

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INTRODUCTION

The condition of women in Iran has been always a controversial issue, subject of much debate, commentary, reporting, and analysis. The Iranian women have traditionally been deprived of a myriad of their basic rights and have suffered from male centered ideologies and male authority that treat women as weak and irrational. The rampant discriminatory policies have also impacted negatively on their lives from the cradle to the grave. The perpetrators are by and large men, and women are always victims in such a patriarchal society. Victimizing women dates back to the pre-Islamic era in Iran as according to Will Durant (1935, p. 375), the status of women after Darius the Great (522-486 BCE) declined, particularly amongst the rich. Upper class women were not allowed to leave their homes whilst in the state of menstruation. These women could not venture out except on stretchers, covered from all four sides with curtains. They were not allowed to talk openly to any men, and it was prohibited for married women to see their nearest male relatives, like their fathers and brothers. There is not even a trace of women in inscriptions and monuments.
There is a proclivity in a patriarchal society to consider women as a non-entity. Their activities, participations, demonstrations and contributions are all unmentioned or regarded as trivial. Indeed, in 1906 in Iran, despite the groundbreaking activities women pioneered during those years, the Constitution failed in giving women equal political status in the Iranian nation and polity. More recently, women had no choice when the Unveiling and Veiling Acts of 1936 and 1983 were promulgated. They have been either coerced to confine to their homes or surrender to the patriarchal policies. Either way, the controlling of or disdaining the women’s practices to echo the ambitions of the nation remained a tool for politics, used by the state. Although the conflicts of the Constitutional Revolution and Pahlavi, and others of that ilk, restricted women’s ability to advance beyond the border of home and family, it also galvanized women to fight to improve their status in the society as participants in the civil society, educators, and standard bearers of modernity and patriotism.

**CONSTITUTIONAL AND PRE-CONSTITUTIONAL MOVEMENTS**

For more than two millennia, Iranian women have been constantly suffering from organized disadvantages, structural inequalities and institutionalized injustices in the patriarchal society, which restricting their opportunities and life prospects. The roots of structural inequalities can be found in “essentialist philosophy and theology, despotism, authoritarian political culture, tribal and patriarchal political system” (Mohammadi 2007, p. 4). Even debates about the constitutional position of women and political reform remained in the hands of men. However, women played an important role in early nationalist movements as they participated in considerable number. For instance, during the Tobacco Movement (1890), women participated in street demonstrations and oppositional meetings when the religious leaders, nationalists and merchants demanded the abolishment of the concessions made by Naseruddin Shah (1848-1896) to the Great Britain. Women who were expected to do home chores surprised everyone by the unprecedented and unconventional act of participation. A great number of women actively assisted the Constitutional Movement in trying to limit the power of the Shah and establishing a parliamentary system. They organized many recondite associations that supported the nationalist movements. The main tasks of these associations were organizing strikes and boycotts, spreading news and energizing the grass roots to revolt against the dictatorial rule of the Shah and the influence of foreigners.

According to Hoodfar (1999), once the women’s movements led to the writing
of the first constitution of Iran, women's participation was neglected and they were refused voting rights. Religious leaders justified the prohibition of women's participation and the refusal of voting rights on the grounds that it was against the Quran, and claimed that God has not enabled women to engage in politics. Much to the men's chagrin, women were instigated by the outcome of the constitution and formed a semi-recondite association to modify the situation through publishing and opening schools for girls. Once they garnered the support by of intellectuals and some moderate groups, the women requested that their association should be legally recognized along with other associations. The women's association was repeatedly attacked by conservatives and religious leaders for these people believed that women's gatherings were against the Sharia. However, some open-minded members of parliament pointed out that there was nothing wrong with these meetings. Finally, the parliament legalized their status but did not support them financially. Frustrated by the Constitution, the women began to raise funds for the schools and the publication. In order to unleash Iran's economy from the chains of foreign powers, the women raised funds to establish the first Iranian National Bank. This collective effort of women showed the way in which they overcame patriarchal constraints. Despite the parliament's reluctance, they stayed involved in national politics. Their public activities including political and organizational experiences helped them develop their political skills. To reconstruct the society, these women decided first to educate other women, and then increase the self-awareness by writing and publishing.

A considerable number of newspaper and magazines were published. The first newspaper written by a woman for women namely Danish (knowledge) was published in 1910. Its mission was educating women about their domestic roles. The journal encouraged formal school education and literacy for women as a way to contribute to their social progress and the betterment of the society. To make sure that each and every woman reads it, the editor of the journal suggested that for those who cannot read it, the husband should read to them every week to his wife so that she would not be deprived of its benefits. Another journal published in 1911 named Amuzegar (instructor) centered on women's education, arguing that women's education could ameliorate conjugal relationships as a great number of people opined that marriage equals misery. The journal praised educated women as they would make better wives and mothers.

The acquisition of knowledge for women was a novel ambition. Another women's journal, Shikufah (blossom), began publication in 1912 in Tehran. It was published under the editorship of Maryam Muzayyin al-Saltanah, a woman activist. This
journal also revolved around the theme of domestic concerns of women as mothers, daughters and especially patriotic motherhood, alert women who strove to comprehend and advance the fundamentals of hygiene and cleanliness, particularly where child rearing was concerned. A column in the journal entitled ‘The services of women to society is not less than men’s but is actually more’ illustrated that the first school for children is their mother’s bosom and mothers are responsible for educating their children until the age of twelve. Patriotic motherhood was important as according to Kashani-Sabet “without healthy children and families, Iran could not raise a nation of dutiful compatriots” (2005, p. 32). The patriotic motherhood paved the way for women’s political socialization. Linda Kerber in her study of republican women in America states that “the notion that a mother can perform a political function represents the recognition that ...the family is a basic part of the system of political communication, and the patterns of family authority influence the general political culture” (1980, p. 283). The notion of patriotic motherhood authorized women to consider themselves not only as participants in the domestic sphere but also as contributors to the civic community.

Although these women’s journals focused on domesticity, the founding of these journals was revolutionary. Following the publication about women’s education on domestic domains, women began publishing journals about women’s status in the Iranian society. For example, in 1922, a journal named Bahar (Spring) concentrated on the status of women in the twentieth century, though not a new issue amongst Iranian intellectuals. This journal argued that Iran’s troubles had their roots in the ignorance of its women, who were denied basic rights in the past. However, it also claimed that discipline and equilibrium could be seen wherever and whenever women have shared in social responsibilities. This periodical commended women’s positive contributions through time and proudly named the twentieth century as the century of women. Yet in another journal named Farhang (culture) in 1925, the position of women in the Iranian society was highlighted. It further stressed that the nation’s improvement and prosperity relied heavily on the education of its women. It encouraged establishing different associations by women to promote female education. With all these journals emphasizing on women’s education, it was not surprising that schools for girls burgeoned in early Pahlavi period. Within five years, the number of girls’ schools and the students had increased. Gradually, more and more families became aware of the advantages of modern education, and an ever increasing number of girls enrolled in these schools (Kashani-Sabet 2005).
WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS UNDER THE PAHLAVI (1925-1979)

Reza Shah promoted educational facilities and opportunities for women by sponsoring a number of secondary schools, which opened the door for women to enter Tehran University in 1935. In the early years of Pahlavi period, from 1925 to 1930s, different women's movement supported the Shah's rule. But once the state gained more control, the women's movements were suppressed and banned in 1930s. However, the Shah was still a pro-women's front. All the women's movements culminated in Reza Shah hosting the Second Congress of Eastern Women in 1932, which brought women from the Middle East and South Asia to Tehran. Two years later, the Shah ordered the Women's Center to be organized. It was the first women's organization that enjoyed close ties with the state. Although it was a charity-orientated institute, it played a momentous role in giving respect and credibility to women's organizations due to its connection with the government. Pursuing his modernization program and emancipation of women, the ruling monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi ratified the Unveiling Act in 1936, which prohibited women to appear veiled in public. This coerced act of unveiling was applauded by the Pahlavi and Western feminists as an epitome of social progress. However, lower middle-class women were inflicted with pain and terror, as they were reluctant to unveil because "to them, the veil was a source of respect, virtue, and pride. It was a symbol of passage from childhood to adulthood" (Milani, 1992, p.35). Forced unveiling, as an attempt at national westernization, was not well received amongst a great number of Iranian women. These women saw the law as an abuse of their bodies and their sense of selves. Many Iranian women not only participated voluntarily in the practice of veiling but also claimed that the veil is the mark of resistance, agency and cultural membership. After a number of demonstrations by women protestors against the Act, the ban was finally lifted in 1941 with the enthronement of Mohammad Reza Shah. After the forceful abdication of Reza Shah (1941), the Women’s Center still pursued its activities. By 1945, the center consisted of sixty women. This period was the period of modification and reorganization, allowing a number of branches to be established for addressing women’s rights. The Women’s Center was eventually dissolved and two new organizations were set up in its stead.

The Women’s party had similar aims as the Women’s center in educating and raising women's consciousness. The other organization was the Women’s League, founded in 1942, with the objective of improving the legal status of women. Each organization supported one particular political party, and issues about women
usually played secondary roles. By 1950s, the women's movement was in alignment with the state's agenda. Mohammad Reza Shah's tactic was a step by step co-operation of women's activities into the political system. Later, the Shah supported women forming organizations dedicated solely to women's rights. Founded in 1954, the New Path Society, *Rah-e No*, became popular amongst affluent Tehran women. The main focus of this organization was the political rights of women, family law and universal suffrage. In 1959, the organization was renamed as the High Council of Iranian Women's Association, which included seventeen other women groups. In 1966, the organization again changed its name to the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI). It was the only legal women group which campaigned for legal reforms with almost 70,000 members. It served as an umbrella organization for fifty five women's organization operating in Iran at the time. According to Mahnaz Afkhami, the secretary-general of the organization from 1970-1978, the WOI grew into “an extensive network of 350 branches and 113 centers offering literacy and vocational classes, birth control and abortion information, job and legal counseling and childcare as well as youth programs and discussion groups” (1994, p. 192). However, it was widely argued that this organization was not a feminist organization, rather it was meant to prevent feminist activities. Whether it had feminist trajectory or not was not crucial to its existence; it was conspicuously important that women who were denied basic human rights in the past were now involved in politics and directed institutes and organizations.

Although involved in politics, Iranian women still did not have the right to vote until 1962. In 1962, a decree was issued by the Prime Minister, Assadollah Alam, allowing women the right to vote and to run in provincial and town elections. The Prime Minister retracted the decree due to compulsion from the conservatives and religious leaders. The women resisted this action by refusing to celebrate the day of Unveiling Act. They organized strikes in which women from different professions participated including teachers, employees and civil servants. Finally, in 1963, women were allowed once again to vote and run for office. On September 17, 1963, elections took place and six women were elected as deputies in the parliament. The parliament which consisted of sixty members had two female senators and in 1965, for the first time in the Iran's history, a woman was appointed a minister.

The presence of these women in the legislative bodies paved the way for the 1967 Family Protection Law, which modified several important aspects of law in favor of women. Under the Family Protection Law, a man could no longer divorce his wife on his own; rather permission from the family court was needed. A man could not marry a second wife without the consent of his first wife, which also had to be
given in the family court. This law allowed women to initiate divorce under some certain circumstances irrespective of whether or not this right was mentioned in her marriage contract. The marriage age for girls was raised from 13 to 18. Regarding the custody of children in case of the father’s death or divorce, the law puts it in the hands of the court for the final decision, thus the past standard in which boys over two and girls over seven would be automatically given to the father was to be decided by the court. The Family Protection Law was slightly modified in 1975 to address the unfair employment laws. The new law gave working mothers seven months paid maternity leave and the choice of working halftime up to the child’s third birthday. Workplaces having more than a certain number of employees were ordered to accommodate on-sight childcare for working mothers. In sum, Iranian women made a notable breakthrough during the Pahlavi period (1925-1979). According to Esfandiyar (1997), by 1978, a year before Iran’s Revolution, “22 women sat in the parliament and 333 women served on elected local council. One-third of university students were female. Two million women were in the work force, more than 146,000 of them were in the civil service” (iranprimer.usip.org).

POST-REVOLUTION

There is no doubt that women played a very significant role in the victory of the Islamic Revolution with their huge support of the leaders. Immediately after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Family Protection Law of 1967 was abolished. Thus, a set of Islamic law was imposed on women, both in the public and private domains. The Islamic veil became mandatory initially for active women and then among the general female population; the law restricted women’s right in child custody and divorce; the marriage age for girl was lowered to 9 from 13; and women could no longer took judiciary occupations. The segregation policy was also implemented where men and women occupy different sections on public transport, in educational or social setting, and so forth. Ayatollah Khomeini believed that everything from the pre-revolutionary time should be either rejected or purified. As Shaditalab (1992) confirms:

Following the revolution, everything which remained from the pre-revolutionary time was rejected... Under the pretext that the West and its model is evil, women were dismissed from the administrative system, and the home was considered the best and the most suitable place for them... (1992, p. 7).
One month after the Revolution in March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that women should not wear miniskirts to work and they should wear the Islamic form of modest dresses. This was the cause of the first massive demonstration in which women appeared unveiled. Immediately after the demonstration, the prime minister of the time, Mr. Bazargan, announced that Ayatollah Khomini’s statement had been distorted by the corrupt royalists and counterrevolutionary people. He claimed that Ayatollah Khomeini never forced veiling on women and Islam is the religion of encouragement, not coercion or force. On March 8 1979, women began demonstrations, meetings and other forms of protest for a week. They all marched in front of the University, the Ministry of Justice, and the Prime Minister’s office. Although Bazargan has announced that the veil would not be mandatory, on March 10, further demonstrations took place. A day later, 20,000 women participated in a rally at Tehran University. Despite all the demonstrations, women were not successful in changing this law but their demonstrations were considered to be an indelible incident in the history of Iran. Finally, the historical moment happened in 1983, when Ayatollah Khomeini ratified the Veiling Act which prohibit women to appear unveiled in public. Women were no longer free to choose either to veil or not to veil. Those who were against the veil and had the financial resources preferred to leave Iran and those who stayed back were either confined to their homes or resisted in different ways. Veiling was a must despite the differences in religion, ethnicity and class. However, the regime believed that the veiling Act came to mean as a facilitator for a professional workspace, where women could do their work with no fear of sexual harassment. As Ayatollah Khomeini said “What we don’t want and what Islam doesn’t want, is to make a woman as an object, a puppet in the hands of men” (qtd in Ramazani, 1980, p. 30).

Having seen this, the Islamist women activists realized that it is not just secular women who are affected by the rules; rather, the rules had a drastic impact on their lives as well. Thus they decided to get involved in social conflict against the regime’s policies. Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolutionary leader of the Islamic Republic, encouraged Islamist women’s activities in public and opposed the hard-lined traditionalists. He stated that “God is satisfied with women’s great services. It is a sin to sabotage this [women’s activity in the public sphere]” (quoted in Kian 1997, p. 77). Yet in another occasion of the referendum for the Islamic Republic he stressed that “all of you women should vote. Vote for the Islamic Republic. You have priority over men” (quoted in Kian 1997, p. 77). Although the application of Sharia, the Islamic law, caused women to lose their civil rights, they kept their political rights. It would be false to think of the experiences of women in post-revolutionary Iran as merely dark pages of history. Although restricted by the
state in domains of family, marriage, and the dress code, Iranian women made considerable progress in education, politics, labor forces and other fields.

Free education was provided for all Iranians including women to the end of high school. The Treaty of Women’s Rights and Responsibilities ensured that it is the women’s right to enjoy the highest level of education. It encouraged women to excel. Iran has accomplished major improvements with its confrontation with illiteracy, to the extent that the international organization UNESCO praised Iran for dealing successfully with the illiteracy problem. Iran was able to increase the literacy rate over the age of six. The total female literacy rate rose from 35.5% in 1976 to 80.34% in 2006. The table below shows the increased rate of education amongst Iranian women (Khaz Ali 2010).

Relative Distribution of Female Population Aged 6 and over, by Literacy Status (1956 - 2006)

The number of female teachers soared considerably as well.
The accomplishment of secondary education was indeed commendable, with many girls winning international awards in different competitions. Iranian women took 60% of the seats in universities, doing their higher education, within a short period of time and made conspicuously exceptional advancement in all academic, specialist, and technical fields. It is clearly indicative of Iran's successful academic planning after the Revolution of 1979.
A great number of Iranian women engaged in writing, publishing and filmmaking. As it is shown in the graph below, there has been an incredible increase in the number of female writers.

Number of Female Editorial Directors by the Year of License (1987-2007)

Number of Books Published by Women (1996-2007)

Iranian female filmmakers are intrepid enough to make movies about women’s issues in a patriarchal society. As one of Iran’s most prestigious woman filmmakers, Tahmineh Milani, is often described as a ‘feminist’ because of her career-long
interest in representing women's stories. Milani's movies take up issues such as family, marriage, polygamy, and child custody. Milani does not make movies in order to create sympathy; rather she is keen to analyze the political and social causes that prevent modification in the status of women.

Regarding the political activities, the Islamic Republic leaders called for female participation in the political and social domains. Confirming women's participation in those spheres, Ayatollah Khamenei mentioned "Women can participate in society in every way— studying, trading, working in an office or a factory, undertaking the same social, political and combative activities as men." (Ayatollah Khamenei quoted in Khaz Ali 2010, p. 19). From then on, women held positions as ministerial advisors on women's affair in different ministries and provinces. The proportion of female legislators, managers, senior employees and officials augmented significantly between 1976 and 2007.

CONCLUSION

Iran does have a long history of women's movement, either secular or religious. Never before in the annals of movement has there been such a tremendous breakthrough. Women have been one of the most important social groups in Iranian civil rights movement. The standards of political activism were raised by female journalists, intellectuals, university students and political activists. The significant role of women cannot be unnoticed both in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and the Islamic Revolution (1979). Political issues concerning the rights and status of women in the society were the core focus of these movements. These women are unanimous in reconstructing the society, by raising awareness and putting it into practice. Despite all the vicissitudes in the patriarchal society of Iran throughout different historical periods, these women made great progress by different movements. The endeavor to equalize their rights with those of men already bore fruit, though in some domains such as compulsory dressing and segregation policies still much work need to be done which can certainly be achieved in near future.
References


