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## *Bypassing Islamism and Feminism: Women's Resistance and Rebellion in Post-revolutionary Iran*

**Abstract.** This paper explores the reason behind the crisis of representation in post-revolutionary competing Iranian gender discourses. These competing discourses include Islamic fundamentalism, religious revisionism, and secular feminism. The crisis of representation is related to at least three main presuppositions and attendant action programs: first, discrimination against women and possible accommodations should be examined in the context of religious and legal institutions. This approach resulted in the depoliticization of women's issues, even though most Iranian women have persistently proclaimed equality and citizenship through political participation. This was the case for the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the reform movement and most recently, the Green Movement following the 2009 presidential election. The second presupposition is that individual identity is a fundamental condition for socio-political activism. The third presupposition is that discrimination against women in post-revolutionary Iran is essentially a legalist strategy and has resulted in campaigns that failed to address women's daily challenges. On the contrary, women's political participation in post-revolutionary Iran shows that gender issues are always political issues and need to be understood politically and politicized. Such a notion challenges attitudes which relegate gender discrimination and social solutions to the purview of religion or secularism.

**Keywords:** Islamic fundamentalism, religious revisionism, secular feminism, reform movement, Green Movement

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**Résumé.** *Au-delà de l'islamisme et du féminisme : la résistance et la rébellion des femmes dans l'Iran postrévolutionnaire*

Cet article explore les raisons à l'origine de la crise de représentation des différents discours sur l'égalité sexuelle dans l'Iran postrévolutionnaire. Parmi ces discours l'intégrisme islamique rivalise avec le révisionnisme religieux, et le féminisme laïc. La crise de représentation est liée à au moins trois présuppositions majeures et aux programmes d'action subséquents: dans un premier temps, la discrimination des femmes et les recours possibles doivent être envisagés dans le cadre des institutions religieuses et juridiques. Cette approche a conduit à la dépolitisation des questions relatives aux femmes, même si la plupart des femmes iraniennes continuent à revendiquer l'égalité et la citoyenneté par leur participation politique. Cela a été le cas lors de la révolution islamique de 1979, du Mouvement de Réforme et, plus récemment, du Mouvement Vert qui a suivi l'élection présidentielle de 2009. La seconde présupposition est que l'identité individuelle constitue le fondement de l'activisme sociopolitique. La troisième est que la discrimination à l'égard des femmes dans l'Iran postrévolutionnaire est essentiellement une stratégie légaliste qui a donné lieu à des campagnes mais n'a pas réussi à aborder le problème des femmes au quotidien. Au contraire, la participation politique des femmes montre que les questions d'inégalité des sexes dans l'Iran postrévolutionnaire sont toujours des questions politiques qui doivent être traitées sur le plan politique et politisées. Cette notion défie l'attitude qui relègue la discrimination sexuelle et les solutions possibles à la compétence de la religion ou de la laïcité.

**Mots-clés :** Intégrisme islamique, révisionnisme religieux, féminisme laïc, mouvement de réforme, Mouvement Vert

A critical review of the principal gender discourses put forward in post-revolutionary Iran, this paper explores the crisis of their representation. It also looks into the alternative political strategies used by women who seek to challenge their discriminatory condition both through individual resistance and by collective action. Besides major political events such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the 1997 reform movement and the newly formed Green Movement – all of which have enormously affected women's lives – post-revolutionary Iran has also been at the center of at least three competing gender discourses: the fundamentalist discourse, the religious revisionism, and the secular feminist discourse. While the second and the third discourses have successfully introduced practices against discriminatory conditions, they are experiencing a crisis in the representation of women's interests. This is partly due to the elaboration of other dichotomies, where personal and social identities are mingled while platforms for action are mostly based on religious attitudes. Such gender discrimination together with institutionalized ethnic and economic inequalities seems to reinforce the processes of political hegemony. These competing discourses are insufficiently inclusive from the standpoint of various feminine interests as well as from the standpoint of the diversity of Iranian society in terms of class, ethnicity, and religion.

The religious revisionism and the secular feminist discourse appear to have successfully questioned and deconstructed some of the more inflexible discrimina-

tory positions of Islamic fundamentalism, especially as concerns the fundamental dichotomy of public versus private distinction. There remain however, a number of discriminatory systems based on class and ethnicity as well as issues relating to religious versus secular practices which tend to perpetuate and legitimate power relations in the name of *shariah*. Through individual or collective action, and more specifically, through political participation, many women have understood these dynamics although their actions have not, at least thus far, achieved political or civil equality.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution gave women an opportunity to participate in the political processes. However, shortly after the Islamic Republic was established, Islamic fundamentalists began marginalizing women on religious pretext. As a result, in the first decade of the Islamic Republic, an increasing number of women sought to challenge their discriminatory condition through reinterpretation of judicial texts used to justify gender discrimination. Such practices led to a movement known as Islamic Feminism which impacted both the domestic and international arenas. Despite major achievements, the trend and discourse which we will refer to as religious revisionism,<sup>2</sup> were not supported by a majority of Iranian women for the various reasons which we explore below.

The reform movement that led to Khatami's election in the 1997 presidential contest, provided another opportunity for women to become more involved in the political process, and to counter a process of depoliticization of women's issues resulting from post war policies. The decline of the reform movement together with the conservative takeover begun in 2002 have produced the most discriminatory conditions ever experienced by Iranian women. The situation coincides with the appearance of the secular feminist trend and various campaigns against the violent policies and practices of hard-line conservatives following the election in 2005 of Ahmadinejad. Iranian women have a hard time identifying with Islamism, feminism and secularism and failed to rally to the feminist movement, just as they mostly remained to the religious revisionism. Opportunities for political action were available to women in the events following the fraudulent elections of June 2009. Through widespread decisive political participation, many Iranians not only protested the direction the country was being taken, but they challenged the basic framework of thinking, action and dichotomies elaborated either by the State or by social forces including the women's movement.

The questions developed in this paper arise from observations and experiences of working on women's issues in Iran. The main question is why the Iranian women's movement, despite tremendous efforts could not find acceptance as a platform for action by a majority of Iranian women, and why women of different social back-

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<sup>2</sup> "Religious revisionist" equates to religious reformism. Yet, in this context I use revisionism to distinguish it from the political reformism movement. Revisionism, which has been suggested by the Iranian linguist Dariush Ashuri, is used to describe the new religious attitudes towards different aspects of post-revolutionary Iran.



grounds prefer to act individually or according to an entirely different political agenda. The observations of the pre- and post-electoral events in Iran contributed to raise this question and the consequent effort to answer it by considering the gaps, weaknesses and shortages. Although there are other alternative answers to this question mostly referring to the weaknesses of organization (Bayat, 2007b), or else to the oppressive political climate, this paper will argue that answers will be found in the under-representation of women's interests in post 1979 gender discourses. Since 2005, many women have become politicized in response to the conservative discrimination inherent in Ahmadinejad's policies. Many of these women however, are not interested in feminist activities, whether Islamist or secularist.

The trend is much like what happened in the reform era, which was built largely on the basis of women's support. Looking back even farther, this seems to be the case of the Islamic Revolution, in which many women participated, hoping for a more egalitarian society. Through political participation, many women not only reject the discriminatory presumption put in place by the state, but bypass alternative agendas prescribed by alternative social forces.

In critically assessing gender discourse in post-revolutionary Iran, this paper seeks the reasons for this failure and the consequent crisis of representation, arising from paying insufficient attention to the political and economic expectations of many ordinary women from different segments of the society.

It is worth mentioning that while women took advantage of the political opportunities offered by the Islamic Revolution and the reform movement, subsequent policies turned out not to promote gender equality but led to alternative forms of discrimination. Many women chose to resist such neo-discriminatory practices through higher education and birth control, which together represent the most successful individual forms of resistance available to women in challenging gender discrimination.

## **Revolutionary and Conservative Discourses of Islamism**

Beginning with the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, modern Iran has witnessed massive female participation in political processes. Many women, while supporting the Constitutionalists claimed their citizenship rights including enfranchisement and education. The first right was delayed until 1963, but the serious efforts of pioneering women to gain access to education was one of the major successes of Iranian women in the early twentieth century (Paidar, 1995; Sanasarian, 1982; Afary, 1996).

The rise of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 was a turning point, with important consequences for women in the mid-twentieth century (Najmabadi, 1998b; Amin, 2002). The Pahlavi dynasty was founded by Reza Shah as a modernizing dictator. Among the regime's early policies, Reza Shah imposed the compulsory unveiling of Iranian women in 1936. This policy negatively impacted women's lives in that a majority of religious women were forced to stay at home without

access to education, employment and other opportunities, which state claimed to provide. The statist unveiling campaign did not emancipate women, but led to a double subjugation. Pahlavi secular modernization led to the marginalization of religious women, stigmatizing them as traditional, backward and uncivilized in a way similar to what has happened in Turkey (Göle, 1996). During the rule of Mohammad Reza (1941-1979) Islamists began mobilizing men and women against the Pahlavi. The early fundamentalist discourse on women and gender, in many ways different from the traditional discourse of the *ulama*, emerged in the late 1950s. Unlike the traditional discourse, the fundamentalist discourse addressed the role of women in the family, in society and politics. They also raised the issue of the Islamic *hejab* providing it with a fresh rationale and new framework. For the first time in 1959, Mohammad Hossein Tabatabayi, the prominent commentator on the Qur'an, published an article in *Maktab e Tashayyo* (1959), in which he discussed how women should appear in the ideal Islamic society. In the following decade, *Fadayian e Eslam* (Devotees of Islam) a radical Islamist group, published *The Guide to the Truth*, a manifesto in which it was argued women should cover themselves in a manner similar to that described by Tabatabayi. Many women in Iranian seminaries theoretically and practically contributed to the construction and institutionalization of the conservative version of the fundamentalist discourse, whose effect was to further marginalize women with respect to socio/political processes (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2009). The trend has continued in post-revolutionary Iran, with the tremendous help and support of the government.

Nevertheless, it was Morteza Motahari who famously contributed to the establishment of a conservative Islamist discourse of veiling and gender, by constructing and theorizing the public versus private dichotomy, with the former represented by men and the latter by women. This paradigm functioned as a gender manifesto for conservative fundamentalism and later for the Islamic Republic (Sadeghi, 2007). Motahari while justifying segregation and defending the *hejab*, attacked Iranian feminists who, like senator Mehranguiz Manouchehrian, were attempting to legislate a more egalitarian approach to the Iranian family code (Ardalan and Ahmadi Khorasani, 2003). Motahari's most influential works on women were published in 1970 and 1974. In these works he challenged not only statist feminism but also the traditional *ulama* who, in his opinion, spread superstitions among people under the name of *shariah* (Motahari, 1970; 1974).

Motahari competed with Shariati, perhaps the most influential thinker and writer of the pre-revolutionary era. Shariati writings combined an anti-imperialist version of Marxism with Shiite notions in a revolutionary way, largely seducing the younger generation. His influential lectures in the Hosseinieh Ershad, a modern religious cultural centre in Tehran, fascinated many people from both religious and secular backgrounds looking for political alternatives to the modernizing despotism of the Pahlavi dynasty and the traditional conservatism of the *ulama*. The role model Shariati recommended for women was Fatemeh, the daughter of the prophet and the wife of Imam Ali, the first Shiite Imam. Shariati's Fatemeh was quite different



from the docile conservative woman depicted in the Shiite historical and jurisprudential texts. She was first and foremost an individual, independent of her father and husband (Shariati, 1981). Motahari on the other hand, attempted to refashion the Great Schism to make it more rational and convincing and to free it from superstitious beliefs. He also tried to lessen Shariati's influence among the younger generation. Motahari's attitude toward gender issues was most of the time a repetition of traditional reading of the Great Schism although perhaps more rational. Nevertheless, in advancing his thesis he also inadvertently changed some initiatives that in the end led to inconsistencies in the iconic discourse. Motahari's Fatemeh is a conservative woman. She is mainly pre-occupied with domestic work and with being supportive of her husband. Motaharis' major contribution to the Islamist discourse lay in justification of the veil, of polygamy, of a father's right to child custody, of a women's ineligibility to seek divorce and gender segregation, thus influencing radical Islamists, conservative merchants and ulama.

Despite the popularity of Shariati's notions of gender in the pre-revolutionary era and his success in encouraging widespread participation of women in the revolutionary processes and struggle, he was marginalized in the post-revolutionary era in favor of Motahari. While Shariati's books became harder to find in the early years of the Islamic Republic, Motahari's book *The System of the Women's Rights in Islam* (1974) was published repeatedly thanks to state finance and support.

Mainly inspired by Shariati as the representative of a revolutionary Islam, many religious and secular women greatly contributed to the revolutionary processes. The role played by women in the establishment of the Islamic republic led Ayatollah Khomeini to proclaim that the Islamic Revolution could not have succeeded with the support of women.

Comparison of the differences between Motahari and Shariati is critical to understanding post-revolutionary debates on gender issues. Islamic fundamentalism has never been monolithic. It consists rather of different versions as represented by Motahari and Shariati. The debate has extended into post-revolutionary Iran such that the conservative and revolutionary versions may finally be compared.

## **“Islamic Feminism”: The Politics of Naming**

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was in fact the response of those who were marginalized by the despotic modernization of the Pahlavi regimes. The revolution was particularly an opportunity for religious and lower class women who sought their own justice, equality and freedom. They might have found these in the rhetoric of the Ayatollah Khomeini and it is misleading to argue, as conservative fundamentalists do, that women along with a majority of men participated in the revolution because of their zeal for Islam *per se*.

Women were amongst the first strata excluded by the newly established Islamic government. The issue of the *hejab* emerged only once the revolutionary events and

execution of Pahlavi elites had been completed. In response, thousands of women rallied on the streets of Tehran for some months. As a result of the street demonstrations, the government rescinded the order even though the *hejab* became mandatory two years later. Beyond the public demonstrations, some activists like Zahra Rahnava and Azam Taleghani, who later became known as Islamic feminists also opposed it. Even so, such opposition soon faded from public view due to the oppressive political environment.

More than the compulsory order banning the *hejab*, the Pahlavi Family Law was revoked by the Ayatollah Khomeini. At a time when rallies against the compulsory *hejab* were taking place, *Keyhan*, the most popular newspaper of the country, published a letter from an unknown reader asking whether the family law passed under the Pahlavi government was Islamic. In response to this letter, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered annulment of the family law despite opposition from many women. The subsequent violent punishment of women, including stoning and execution, has also elicited protest from Iranian women. The gradual exclusion of women from the political decision making processes has been an implacable consequence of Islamist gender policies. If in the early parliamentary assemblies women were strongly represented and outspoken, by the fourth *Majles*, the number of female deputies dropped dramatically. The presence of women in other decision making processes was also increasingly limited. These practices resulted in the gradual disillusionment of many of the women who supported the revolution and helped to establish the Islamic Republic (Hoodfar, 1999; Paidar, 2002: 246, 7; Kian, 1997).

Thousands of secular women including leftists have been executed, tortured and raped in prison during the bloody political purges of the first decade of the Islamic Republic. In fact, women from different strata of society have lost some of their main citizenship rights as a direct consequence of the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This however has not led to passivity. While there have been limited opportunities for protest, women have resisted individually and collectively in different ways (Paidar, 1995; Hoodfar, 1999).

The discriminatory policies adopted by the Islamic Republic surprised many of the women who had supported the Islamic revolution. The emergence of a new discourse labeled “Islamic feminism” was originally an attempt to reconcile Islam and women’s rights. However, as will be explored below, the term is mostly used by secular women, who either negatively or positively evaluate the activities and attitudes of these men and women (Najmabadi, 1998a; Moghadam, 2003).

The term “Islamist feminism” was most likely first used by Parvin Paidar (Paidar, 2002, 266) in a book she co-authored with another Iranian scholar (Yeganeh and Tabari, 1982). The more spiritually inclined women however, once free of the ideological notions of the first years of the Islamic Republic, became less dogmatic. This is perhaps why, in the following years, the term “Islamist feminism” has been replaced gradually by “Islamic feminism” which emphasizes less the ideological affiliation of these women. It should be noted however, that Islamist or Islamic femi-



nists do not promote feminism. Even if it is true that the activities of many Islamic women can be considered feminist, and, as Paidar remarks, at “no other historical period has feminism been accepted by so many Iranian women as part of their identity” (Paidar, 2002: 241), so long as these women do not accept to be called feminist, the usage of the term would be inappropriate. Use of the term attributes an attitude and subsequent identity to agents who do not accept it and understand their opinions in a very different way. Thus, and in so far as the term “Islamist” or “Islamic” implies the personal belief of an individual agent and outlook in the public arena, usage is misleading and problematic. In post-revolutionary Iran many ex-Islamist women have changed and become less ideological having once experienced religious government. It would none-the-less be misleading to call these women feminists. Implicit recognition of the distance between perceptions and practices of such women and subsequent classification by secular scholars studying gender issues in post-revolutionary Iran is crucial for the purpose of this article. Such distance must be taken into account since it would manifest itself in conflicting outlooks toward women’s issues and consequently competing alternatives for challenging the patriarchy. Instead of Islamic feminists, some of these actors have taken to calling themselves “religious revisionist women” (*zanaan e no andish e dini*). The term seems to be intentionally selected, since “religious revisionism” (*no andish*) is the term used by (male) religious intellectuals to describe their approach.

It should be noted that for many religious revisionist women, who support the Islamic Republic and possibility of progress in women’s rights within that context, the issue at hand is not simply achieving a more humanist interpretation of Islam but also of social policy. Considerable effort on the part of many women in post-revolutionary Iran has been expended in challenging discrimination and increasing restriction of women’s opportunities in the name of religion. However, with the rise of the reform era and improved political opportunities for women, it became evident that the discriminatory policies had more to do with power politics than with religion as was first thought. This is partly why the religious revisionism based on the reinterpretation of judicial texts declined dramatically after the reform era.

## **Fragile Relations: *Zanan* and Religious Intellectualism**

The complicated and contrasted relationship between what the initiators of gender and religious discourse had in mind and the Iranian religious intellectualism which emerged in the second decade of the Islamic Republic deserves attention. Religious intellectualism was treated largely through the journal *Keyhan e Farhangi* (*The Cultural Keyhan*), which published articles and interviews with Iranian intellectuals and religious scholars, including Abdolkarim Soroush. The journal *Keyhan* was succeeded by *Kian*, the journal that reportedly inspired publication of *Zanan*, a woman’s journal. *Zanan* (1992-2008) was among the pioneer women’s journals,



publishing numerous articles written by reformist clerics, intellectuals, and jurists supporting women's issues. Geographically close to *Kian* and theoretically influenced by it, *Zanan* aimed at offering new ways of jurisprudence which would be gentler and kinder to women (Najmabadi, 1998a). *Zanan* also offered an approach toward women's issues within a framework of religious intellectualism. Like many publications dealing with such issues, *Zanan* was not intended as a vehicle to question Islam or the role of jurists in Islamic society, but to make Shiite jurisprudence more compatible with women's rights and the role of women in the modern era. Its main purpose was to introduce friendlier versions of *fiqh* more in tune with women's situation in modern society. *Zanan* was also a platform for many secular women, among them, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi. Having argued from inside the religious and political framework, the writers of *Zanan* were mostly pre-occupied with challenging the discriminatory status quo by introducing and formulating new approaches toward *fiqh*. Therefore, instead of concerning themselves with Islam, the gender and religion debates were posed mostly in terms of Shiite jurisprudence and practices in the post-revolutionary political environment. In doing this, *Zanan* and other journals such as *Farzaneh*, avoided raising taboo issues like the compulsory *hejab*. Not only did they not want to risk censure, but they were not inclined to disagree.

Although *Zanan* and similar journals were strongly influenced by religious intellectualism, the discourse of religious revisionism experienced difficulty cohabiting with religious intellectualism. For reasons which will be explored below, the controversial relationships between practitioners of these approaches resulted in the final separation of the two.

Part of the complicated relationship arises from the patriarchal character of religious intellectualism. In the Iranian context, this branch of knowledge has been reluctant to address women's issues and to get involved in discussions of gender equality. The number of the books, papers, and interviews published by male religious intellectuals including Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar is not comparable to the publications of Muslim religious intellectuals like Abu Zaid and Arkoun. *Iran e Farda* chiefly edited by Reza Alijani as a religious nationalist activist (*Melli Mazhabi*) is an exceptional example unequalled elsewhere. The reluctance seems to have many things to do with the gender-biased attitudes against women and gender equality of the majority of Iranian religious intellectuals, producing a shared sense that gender issues are below their status. By and large such an attitude is not limited to women and gender issues. Iranian religious intellectualism is first and foremost pre-occupied with holy text rather than issues like sociology, textual anthropology or culture and tradition generally. Those who have entered the field have for the most part either repeated and developed the views of non-Iranian religious scholars like Shamseddin (1997) or else remained at a far remove from the contemporary debate on gender and women's equality among Muslim intellectuals. Although Iranian religious intellectuals have been successful in framing and initiating critical attitudes towards Islamic fundamentalism and traditionalism and raising the issues of human rights and democracy (Mir-Hosseini, 2000; Bayat, 2007a; Rajaei, 2007), their attitude



towards gender equality remains poor and to a significant degree, quite conservative (e.g. Kadivar, 2008; Mehrizi, 2004).

The consolidation of the discipline along patriarchal lines resulted in a break between religious intellectualism and female intellectuals actively seeking alternatives within this discourse. Nevertheless, the complexities of the relationship did not lead to the women adopting independent initiatives. Instead, with the rise of the reform movement the religious revisionism was marginalized, partly as a result of cooptation by the political process, a development which prevented these women from pursuing their interest in theoretical issues.

Although religious revisionism in the pre-reform era benefited from the progressive attitudes of moderate clerics and religious intellectuals, it failed to bring about independent theories put forward by women intellectuals. In addition to this, many women from the second generation of the Islamic Republic did not feel that *Zanan* and similar journals, and more generally the religious revisionism represented their attitudes and demands. Few of the younger women even knew about the journal and if they did, the discussions and issues were not of much interest. During the almost sixteen years of its publication, *Zanan* and similar journals mainly represented the voice of middle class religious women, who having become disappointed in the political trends of the Islamic Republic began looking for gender equality by different means.

Sensing this, and aware of the decline of the literature of reformist discourse Shahla Sherkat, *Zanan* editor-in-chief began addressing and reporting the ordinary challenges facing women on a daily basis. In the last years of its publication until its closure in early 2008, *Zanan* shifted towards covering the challenges of young women and the discriminatory conditions in which women frequently found themselves. In one of its final issues, the journal publicized a piece on Zahra Bani Yaqub<sup>3</sup> as well as a report on a woman raped in public by members of the Basij paramilitary group.

On a daily basis however, women have resisted gender discrimination in a variety of ways (Bayat, 2007b). Higher education for instance, was among the preferred strategies for self-empowerment. In past years women outnumbered men in university admissions two to one, accounting for about 65 percent of total enrollment.

## The Reformist Politics and Religious Revisionist Women

The landslide victory of Khatami in the presidential election of 1997 was another turning point, in which women played a major role. Khatami's discourse according to many women was not only about freedom and civil society, but about equality

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<sup>3</sup> Zahra Bani Yaqub was a young medical student arrested and imprisoned. It was reported that she committed suicide while in prison. According to different sources, she was raped and killed by the police to hide the rape.

and specifically, gender equality. Due to his comprehensiveness and his stress on participation and freedom, his rhetoric fascinated many women, who had become progressively disenfranchised over the recent past. Much as they participated in the revolution, women took advantage of the 1997 election to shift from individual resistance to collective action in the hope of receiving fairer treatment.

The rise of reform and the election of a reformist government coincided with a relative decline of religious revisionism due to a number of reasons: First and foremost among them, the reform movement offered women political opportunity to become directly involved in the political process. In this way, women who had been critical of post-revolutionary policies found an opportunity to influence the unequal power relations in favor of women.

Although women's participation has been rhetorically and practically encouraged in reformist discourse, very few opportunities actually materialized either because of conservative obstruction or because of reformists' lack of determination. Being aware of accumulated but unfulfilled popular demands and the potential these held for destabilizing society, reformists could not act freely. The reformist attitude toward women was conservative for the same reason.

The reformist government finally adopted a depoliticized discourse on development, apparently more suitable for silencing both the conservative and populist factions. The development approach had a double function: on the one hand, as a gesture of good will and as justification for the cooptation of improvements in women's conditions which otherwise could lead to hard line reaction, and on the other hand, as a safety valve for women's demands.

To be fair, when compared to previous administrations, the Khatami administration paid more attention to women's issues and progress was made during the eight years of the Khatami presidency (Sadeghi, 2010). Yet the development approach tended to depoliticize gender issues. The Khatami administration also suffered from preoccupation mostly with middle and upper class women of both religious and secular backgrounds and may explain why so many lower class women were attracted to the rhetoric of Ahmadinejad. Economically speaking, the reformist discourse shared a number of the economic liberalization precepts of the Rafsanjani administration which is popularly regarded as the "construction era". The "construction era" produced corruption and increasing poverty in the post-war period (Ehsani, 1994, 2009). Although Rafsanjani was known as a liberal politician, his administration in fact practiced economic liberalization without allowing participation in the political process. In this way, justice for the "oppressed" as one of the revolutionary ideals was replaced by the structural adjustment policies of the post war period. In the process, many vulnerable social groups were further marginalized. During the eight years of the Rafsanjani presidency (1989-1997) several suburban riots protesting economic liberalization took place in different parts of the country, all of them violently suppressed. The privatization of public sector industries transferred a number of public resources and companies to preferred elements of civil society and highly ranked political elites, like the Islamic Republic



Guardian Corps and other, highly ranked political elites. Although State transfers have dramatically increased since Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, the process was begun under Rafsanjani.

Economic liberalization also deepened the gap between the poor and the rich, which in turn negatively affected Iranian politics. Liberalization led to the disenfranchisement of different segments of society to the extent that post Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) policies functioned as a double edged sword, on the one hand depoliticizing society and neutralizing political dissent while on the other hand, building up a new bourgeoisie and buying the loyalty of the investors.

Khatami's landslide victory took place in this political and economic environment. His government anticipated easing the pains of the lower classes, severely marginalized through structural adjustment on the one hand while providing political opportunity for the general population on the other hand. Comparatively speaking, Khatami's reformist government was much more liberal than Rafsanjani's especially in terms of the opportunities for political and civil participation. Nevertheless, economically it continued the liberalization of the economy.

The fourth development plan ratified by the reformist parliament emphasized "gender equality", which appeared to promise a major effort to address women's issues. The Guardian Council however, rejected it and removed the term from the development plan draft. Subsequently Khatami appointed a woman as Vice-President for Environmental Affairs, a first in post-revolutionary Iran. Khatami opened the Centre for Women's Participation, whose main task was to empower women to run non-governmental organizations and increase their participation in the socio-political, economic and cultural processes of civil society. In many respects, the rise of the reform and the reformist government had been a step forward. Nevertheless, due to the political and economic nature of the reformist discourse the efforts were a disappointment for many women across all social classes although for different reasons. High unemployment, drug addiction, inflation, and other economic problems seriously compromised lower class women. With respect to the upper middle classes, reformists seemed to lack the political will to challenge conservative rules and embrace the more sensitive gender issues. Increasing expectations and disappointments led to divergent electoral behaviors in the 2005 presidential election. These elections were, on the one hand, boycotted by many middle- and upper-class women and men, while many among the lower classes voted for Ahmadinejad.<sup>4</sup> It turned out however that despite his rhetoric, Ahmadinejad's success was not so much due to his electoral promises of greater social justice, but through establishment of autocratic rule determined to suppress all opposition, whether from the poor or from the rich.

The conservatives targeted women, intellectuals, workers, university students and professors, journalists, NGO representatives and all associational activity. A great deal of effort has been expended to lessen women's participation in different social,

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<sup>4</sup> See Sadeghi, 2010.

economic, political, and cultural activities. The gender ratios and quota system of the early years following the revolution have been reinstated as a means to prevent women from receiving university educations,<sup>5</sup> and women are being beaten, arrested and imprisoned by the Iranian police for being “improperly veiled”. At the same time government has tried to revitalize discredited practices like polygamy and temporary marriage. Numerous websites have been filtered, *Zanan* as a main journal for covering and addressing women’s issues has been shut down and secular activists including the members of the One Million Signature Campaigns<sup>6</sup> have been persecuted increasingly through pressure, intimidation and imprisonment.

In the meantime, while the reformist discourse was declining Ahmadinejad’s government was seeking to advance an economic agenda as a means to depoliticize society.

## **Secular Feminism: Media Politics and the Crisis of Representation**

In many respects, the rise of Ahmadinejad was of great consequence, not only for the political future of the country, but also for women. The decline of the reform agenda convinced many women that the only option available lay not in a strategy and practice that seeks solutions within the internal dynamics of social change, but in the social forces arising from below, outside the official discourse of the established authority. The various groups disagreed however, as to the extent to which existing codes were negotiable. The One Million Signature Campaign, begun in mid 2006, and the Anti-stoning Campaign are notable examples of such efforts aimed mostly at changing the legal standard with the support of women as a social force. Both strategies proved to be successful in some ways, while failing in others. The fact that the main goal of these movements was to change the legal process resulted in rejection by most Iranian women uninterested in feminism or secularism as a social identity at the center of an action program.

These campaigns benefited from, among other things virtual spaces and new media allowing them to broadcast news, mobilize, teach and train men and women and create social ties and networks both internally and internationally. The effective use of new media and of virtual spaces along with social networking were major elements in the success of these campaigns especially in view of the increasing level of censorship and pressure against civic activities. Indeed, these initiatives and methods have tremendously inspired and influenced the Green Movement.

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5 In 2005 Ahmadinejad’s government reduced women’s university admissions to between 40 and 50% of the entering class.

6 The Campaign began in the summer of 2006, when a peaceful women’s demonstration in Haft e Tir Square, Tehran, was violently attacked by the Iranian police. Subsequently, a group of women announced that in light of Ahmadinejad’s and the conservative’s oppressive political agenda they would collect one million signatures to protest the discriminatory legal apparatus of the Islamic Republic.



In some cases however, the new media was also used for grandiose coverage suggesting that those actions were not only representative of a majority of Iranian women but were also supported by them. Therefore, despite innovative actions, these campaigns were not successful in representing women from middle and lower classes or women belonging to ethnic minorities. According to data gathered in the spring of 2009, only nineteen percent of Tehran residents, mostly from the upper middle classes, were aware of the existence of the One Million Signature Campaign, with even fewer pledging support.

Increasing political pressure, intimidation and execution of activists and high-level censorship were indeed important factors in producing such behaviors. And yet, Iranian society had never enjoyed such widespread access to information as in recent years. It is unlikely therefore that a lack of information and increasing censorship alone are the reasons behind these facts. Indeed, in a society where, according to reports, over 25 million people have access to the Internet, a lack of information is more likely to reveal a lack of interest. The theory is even more credible when one considers that in the history of modern Iran there has never been such open hostility towards women as in the past five years of conservative rule. As an example, during implementation of the Social Security Plan, ten thousand women were arrested, attacked, beaten up, and imprisoned for wearing inappropriate *hejabs*.<sup>7</sup> Despite outright discriminatory conditions, secular feminists were not able to mobilize Iranian women. Instead, many women, whether religious or secular, waited for renewed opportunity to challenge existing discriminatory bias based on a more comprehensive political discourse and action.

This is partly due to the fact that a majority of Iranian women do not identify with either the secular feminist or Islamist agendas.<sup>8</sup> This is all the more true for women of lower social and economic status. Some Iranian feminists endorsed this without questioning whether the “shame” of admitting lower class women into the feminist movement was passed (Ahmadi Khorasani, 2009). Such notions suggest that unlike other societies, where liberal secular feminism has been criticized as exclusive, in Middle Eastern societies, including Iran, secular feminism is admired and considered the unique alternative for women’s liberation.

On the other hand the majority of women are not interested so much in changing the legal process, but in effecting structural, political, social and economic changes of power relations. It seems that there is a gap between the expectations of the majority of women and secular feminists, who have practically and theoretically concluded that the legal process is the principle obstacle to reform. Quite a few examples can be cited as filling this gap, as for instance, the Women’s Charter of 2009.<sup>9</sup>

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7 The plan was introduced by government of Ahmadinejad’s in 2006. It was conducted through hooligans and aimed at violently confronting inappropriately covered women

8 During field work conducted in 2006-2008 on women’s political participation, many women, particularly from lower classes, believed that changing the discriminatory legal process had nothing to do with their daily problems and could not solve them.

9 Among citations, we should mention the Iranian Women’s Charter of 2009 published before the last presi-

The secular feminism of recent years could at best address the interests of middle class women. Yet, the majority of the middle classes also seek solutions beyond the scope of the alternatives advanced by this discourse and movement. In some cases, Iranian secular feminists suffer from total irrelevance. As an example, in recent years some feminist scholars have published books and papers praising “lipstick jihad” (Moaveni, 2006) and “sexual revolution” (Mahdavi, 2008) and admiring Iranian youth for resisting patriarchal rule. Apart from shortages, such discourse in fact questions the very notion of feminism and feminist identity. It assumes that the more women become secular, the more they become conscious and self confident in the domain of sexuality. The research findings on the notions of young Iranian females prove the contrary: the more women are secular, the less confident they become with respect to their sexual behavior and vice versa (Sadeghi, 2008; Moruzzi and Sadeghi, 2006).

The secular feminist and religious modes of resistance against patriarchy have been successful in some ways (Kian-Tiebault, 1999; Hoodfar and Sadeghi, 2009) and failed in others. Many ordinary women however, have found other routes of resistance against their discriminatory circumstances (Bayat, 2007b). Among them we should mention the progresses women have made in education (Kian-Tiebault, 2005) and in birth control (Hoodfar, 1995; 1996; Hoodfar and Assadpour, 2000).

Similar to the religious revisionism, secular feminism first merged the personal and social identities of women and then acted upon the dichotomy of religion versus secularism as the most important distinction of post-revolutionary Iran. Association or dissociation from certain religious beliefs however, cannot constitute individual social identity, especially when these distinctions are reinforced by a hegemonic force like that of the Iranian state. This presumption suffers from the notion that women’s liberation or subjugation takes place mostly in the sphere of religiosity. The political experiences of post-revolutionary Iran suggest that many women consider their problems as first and foremost political rather than secular or religious. As mentioned earlier, the rise of a reform movement rooted in the political participation of women bypassed the religious revisionism as the only strategy for resistance possible in the first and second decade of the Islamic Republic. Among other lessons that can be drawn from this experience is the replacement of the attitudes towards religiosity with political discourse and henceforth deconstruction of the religiosity secularism dichotomy that functions in most cases to perpetuate non-democratic and discriminatory practices. The dichotomy seems to suffer from depoliticization of the issues that have first and foremost to do with power relations. This is the case of women in all Middle Eastern and central Asian societies with respect to various

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dential election. The Charter reflects many women expectations and contradicts part of the agendas put forward by reformist and secular(ist) women over past years. According to the Woman’s Charter, based on interviews conducted in different parts of Iran, the majority of Iranian women from the lower classes complain mostly about economic shortages, and social problems such as insecurity.



religious and secular political contexts, all of which have marginalized women from sociopolitical processes. Reinforcing such a dichotomy will lead to further depoliticization of women and gender issues, without considering that this can be exactly what many women refuse to do, and this in the final analysis, is how patriarchy whether fundamentalists or secular, gain advantage.

## The Green Movement: Beyond Dichotomies?

The post-electoral mass protests of June 2009 onwards provided another opportunity for women to question not only the constructed hegemonic, public private dichotomy, but also that of religious versus secular as reinforced by both gender and religion and by secular feminist discourse (Sadeghi, forthcoming). Many women from both religious and secular backgrounds actively participate in the political processes and struggle against the sociopolitical position which tends to institutionalize deviation behaviors, corruption, fraud, intimidation and torture in the name of *shariah*.

The Green Movement was and is impossible without feminine participation. Yet, many *chadori* women (women who wear a chador) also participate in the mass protests. Albeit they are largely “improperly” veiled women, who are screened by the international media. The policy itself reinforces gender discrimination against which Iranian women from all strata of society must struggle.

Like the Iranian Revolution and the reform movement the Green Movement is also an opportunity for change through engagement. According to personal observation, many young men and women who were previously more interested in fashion, style, make-up and cocktail parties have changed as a result of recent political developments. This again shows not only the importance of the political situation for opportunities to resist and act, but the major effect of politics as a crucible for the formation of individuals’ minds and practices. The same was the case for the parents, the first generation of the Islamic Republic, those who gave rise to the Islamic Republic, and who most likely have become depoliticized through post-revolutionary policies. The return of politics is not only changing the revolution generation but also their children, leading them to act outside of personal identity. The Green Movement also operates as an opportunity for the re-appropriation of a political space in which to reclaim their equality and freedom.

The Green Movement has produced a marginalization of secular feminism. Although many secular feminists participate in post-electoral events, their personal identity as secular feminists is not a determining factor. Many of the religious women who joined the Green Movement, including revisionists, have been arrested. The diversity of the Green Movement proves that traditional dichotomies such as religiosity and secularism are insufficient to represent women’s demands, which, more than religion should be tackled within the political context of the modern nation-state, that is, of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



## Conclusion

In post-revolutionary Iran at least three main gender discourses compete with each other, each with certain outcomes and prescriptions for Iranian women. The fundamentalist discourse tried to legitimize and perpetuate the discriminative policies of the Islamic Republic by constructing separate private and public spheres, in which the private is considered to represent feminine and the public the masculine. The two rival discourses, namely religious revisionism and secular feminism each suffered from a crisis of representation. Intellectualism sought clues within the framework of the jurisprudential thinking necessary to challenge the orthodox and conservative readings of the *shariah*. Such a strategy might have opened opportunities for women. The discourse however, mostly represented the demands of religious middle-class women. On the other hand, many ordinary women sought political opportunities to challenge not only gender discrimination, but other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity and class. This opportunity presented itself in the form of the reform movement, which led to a partial marginalization of religious revisionism.

The reform era however, showed that blockage of gender equality is ultimately very closely linked to the nature of political power relations, which in turn rely on the instrumentalization of *shariah* to perpetuate inequality at all levels. The reform era raised a debate on the source of government legitimacy, a debate which remains open: Republican attitudes consider participation in the political process the main source of legitimacy as opposed to conservative and fundamentalist attitudes which advocate that the government is legitimized by God, not the people. The debate has delineated sketches for women and gender issues.

With the decline of the Islamist and reformist discourse, secular feminists attempted to challenge the discriminatory context. Despite their relatively successful efforts in initiating campaigns, secular feminism increasingly became a liberal upper class feminism, which was not attractive for most Iranian women, who do not consider feminism and secularism as suitable frameworks for action. Instead, the majority of Iranian women either resisted individually or took advantage of another political opportunity to collectively rebel against the discriminatory situation along with existing rules. The question as to whether this phase will produce greater equality or simply more discrimination remains to be answered. This action however stresses the importance of political processes and social movements for any emancipation, including woman's emancipation especially in authoritarian and non-democratic contexts.

In conclusion, competing gender discourses in post-revolutionary Iran require revision of some of their basic tenets on the basis of the following considerations:

First, gender discrimination is not free of politics, while in many cases, the issue and subsequent liberatory projects have been analyzed and sought out in the realm of either religion or legal apparatus. On the other hand, these heuristic models have little to do with women's perception of their daily challenges. Second,



the individual religious identity of women has little to do with their political projects and participation, while the opposite has been followed up by both religious revisionist women and secular feminists. And finally, the Iranian secular feminism and religious revisionism are by and large liberal middle class approaches which have failed to co-opt the demands of the majority of Iranian women.

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