



Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today

Author(s): Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi

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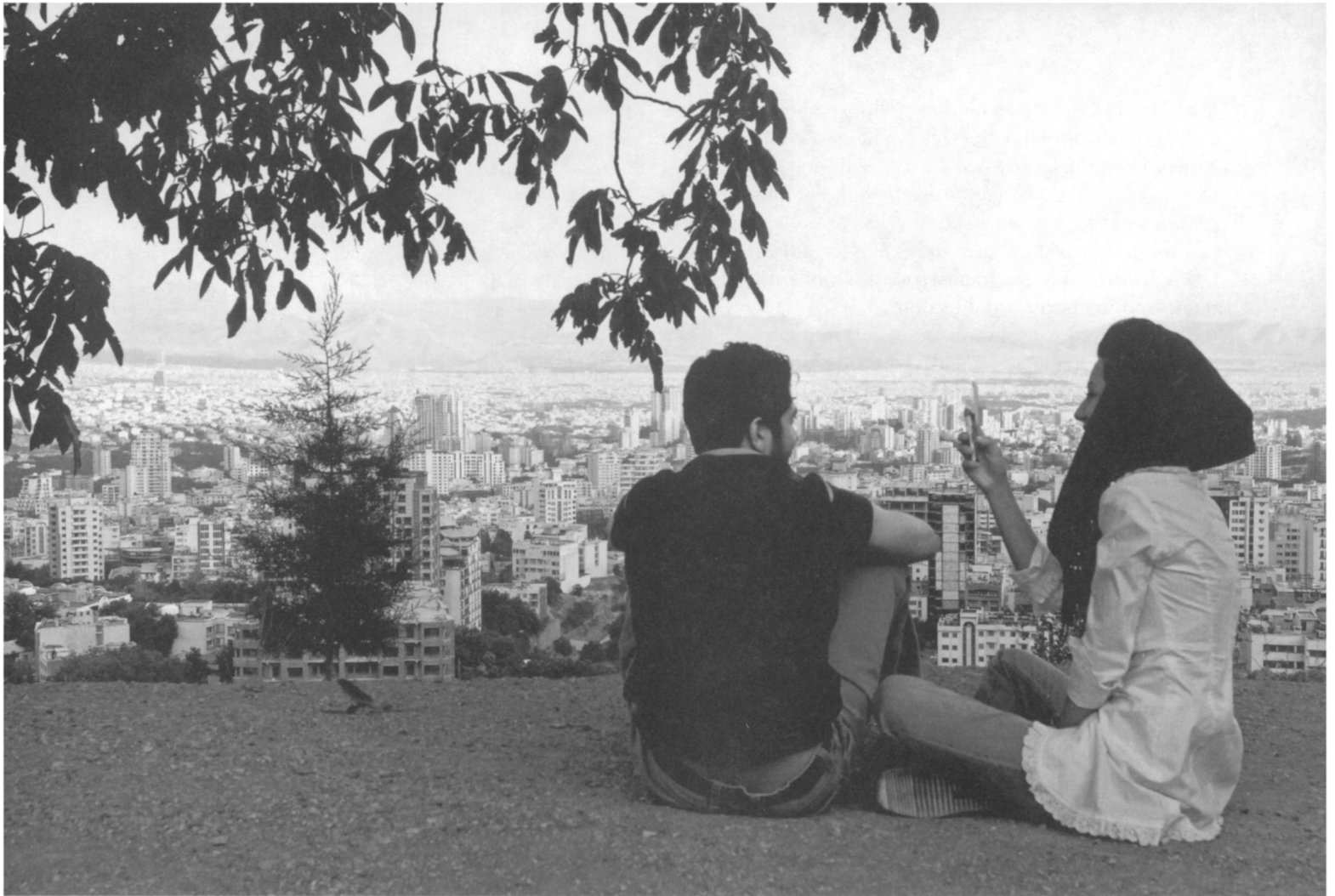
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In the Velenjak neighborhood, overlooking Tehran, a woman takes a photo with her mobile phone.

ERIC RECHSTEINER

Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire

Young Iranian Women Today

Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi

In evaluating women's position in the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran, it is important to look at the social, as opposed to the legal, aspects of citizenship. In the decades following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian society has become resolutely more modern, despite the public face of elderly tradition presented by its clerical political elite. This

*Norma Claire Moruzzi is associate professor of political science and gender and women's studies at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Fatemeh Sadeghi is a lecturer in political thought and women's studies at Islamic Azad University-Karaj, and a member of the editorial board of the journal *Goft-o-Gu*.*

modernization enhanced trends that were already evident before the revolution. In 1978–1979, for the first time more Iranians lived in cities than in the countryside, and nearly half the population could read and write. The number of births per family rose in the early years of the revolution, but by 1986 the fertility rate peaked, and then began a dramatic decline. The transition to a predominantly youthful, urban, literate society has continued, despite the impression of enduring generational stability projected by its mostly aging political leadership. As the geographer Bernard Hourcade puts it, the “sons of the

Shah” carried out the revolution, and for the most part they still dominate formal politics. But post-revolutionary society is predominantly composed of the “sons and daughters of Khomeini.” These younger generations have had a radically different experience of social development, not only in terms of state ideology, but also in terms of demographic change.¹ Underneath the surface, Iranian society is evolving, on its own terms, and in unexpected directions.

What does this evolution mean for young women, the “daughters of Khomeini”? Women have seen dramatic improvements in levels of literacy and education and in control over fertility. Yet women’s rights as legal and political citizens remain curtailed, and their rate of participation in the formal work force surprisingly low. The “daughters of Khomeini” are not sequestered in the private home. They share with their male peers access to education and frustration with the economic and political barriers their generation must surmount. They also share with young men annoyance at the Islamic Republic’s attempts to segregate the sexes and impose an arid public morality, partly in the form of mandatory “Islamic dress” for women. Many young women have famously discarded the black chador in favor of ever more snug-fitting manteaux and ever more colorful headscarves. Along with this looser adherence to veiling (*bad hejab*) has come a set of looser attitudes toward social and sexual freedoms. Yet, particularly in the social and sexual arenas, the decline of traditional patriarchy has not meant the end of gender discrimination.

Key Indicators

Statistics on social development, particularly the two key indicators of education and fertility, demonstrate that Iranian women are generally much better off now than they were before the revolution.

The excellent, comprehensive *Survey of the Social, Cultural and Economic Situation of Families*² makes clear that rising female literacy and enrollment in education, at least as much as population programming by the state, have influenced individual and family decisions to limit the number of births. The correlation between women’s literacy and the population growth rate is actually closer than the correlation between the population rate and state policy on fertility and family planning.³ Immediately after the revolution, the Islamic Republic instituted pro-natalist policies that encouraged an abrupt rise in the birth rate. As the population soared, in 1993 the state began effective family planning programs, including making contraceptives available and requiring family planning classes before a couple is permitted to obtain a marriage license. But the population growth rate had been dropping since its high point in 1986, and had already fallen significantly by 1992. By comparison, women’s literacy rates had been going up since before the revolution, and primary and secondary school enrollments have probably been increased by the state’s single-sex schools policy,

which has helped to overcome the hesitation of more socially conservative families (see tables 1 and 2).

	Total	Men	Women
1970	65.7	54.4	77.1
1975	58.0	46.4	69.7
1980	50.3	39.1	61.8
1985	44.1	34.2	54.1
1990	36.8	27.8	46.0
1995	30.0	22.0	38.1
2000	24.0	17.0	31.1

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

	Total	Men	Women
1970	43.9	30.3	57.9
1975	35.2	23.2	47.6
1980	27.0	17.1	37.1
1985	19.7	12.0	27.4
1990	13.7	8.3	19.2
1995	9.1	5.6	12.8
2000	6.2	3.8	8.7

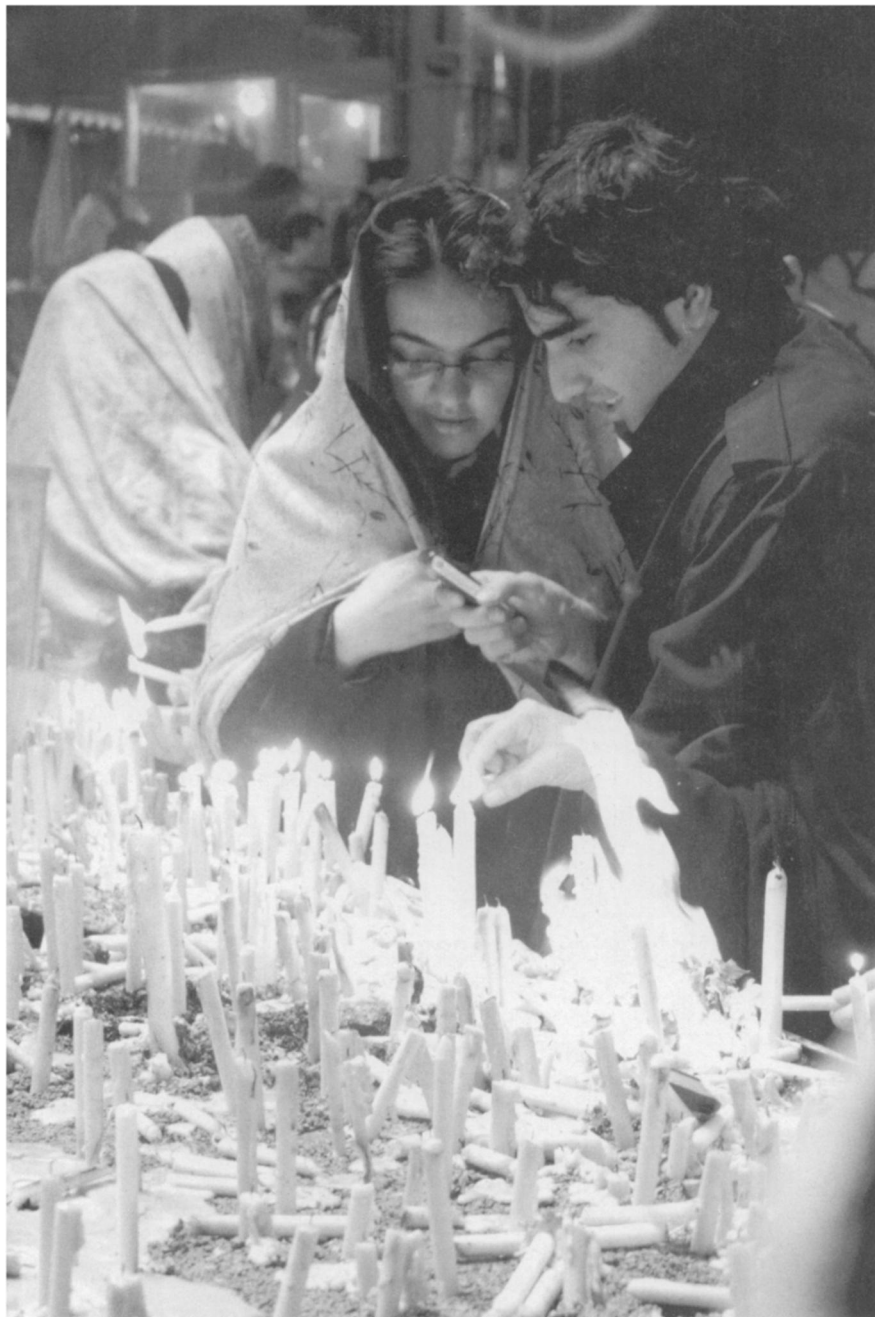
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Although girls are still enrolled at slightly lower rates than boys in primary and secondary schools, in 2002 female university students for the first time outnumbered males. But the key years of transition fell between 1985 and 1991. In this period, the majority of the Iranian female population became literate, while the population growth rate peaked and then began its sharp decline (see table 3).

1956–1957	3.1
1966–1967	3.1
1976–1977	2.7
1986–1987	3.9
1991–1992	2.5
1996–1997	1.5

Lunar years as per the Islamic calendar. Source: Statistical Center of Iran

Another striking correlation can be seen between the population growth rate and the mean age at first marriage (see tables 4 and 5). These inverse trends roughly parallel each other, as the mean age of first marriage rises, falls and rises again (for all groups except rural women, for whom it rises consistently), while the birth rate falls, rises and falls again. Perhaps even more significant than the rise, fall and subsequent rise in the mean age of women at first marriage is the shrinking age difference between spouses, which falls consistently over the same



Young people light candles for Ashura and check text messages.

KIMIA MALEKI

period. Contrary to popular assumptions, the age difference between rural spouses has always been smaller than between urban spouses.

Educated, mobile, and expecting later marriages and fewer pregnancies than their mothers, young women encounter a changed social landscape. Though elderly patriarchy is the ubiquitous image of the clerical state, at the daily level, the conventions of authority that maintained the role of the father in the household and the state have been disrupted. The decline of formal traditionalism has meant that gender inequality has evolved into specifically modern forms: sexual harassment on the street, gender discrimination in the workplace and the sexual double standard in the bedroom. No longer confined to hearth and home, young Iranian women must now negotiate their actions more directly with their families, peers and

colleagues, while being accused of equal responsibility within situations still structured by unequal power relations. If women no longer experience explicitly patriarchal authority on a daily basis, what they experience is definitely still a “masculinist” structure of social authority: not necessarily the dominance of the father, but definitely still the preeminence of men.

Gender Discourse

During the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war, a slogan repeatedly appeared on walls: “An unveiled [*sans* full chador] woman has a zeal-less husband.” While, at first glance, the phrase merely exhorted men to make sure women dressed “modestly” so that the male honor remained intact, it was also associated with defending the country’s *namus* (honor) against all enemies, external and internal. It was intended to remind the zealous Muslim man that the concepts of *jihad* and *namus* overlapped. The ideal woman during those years was one who modeled herself after Zaynab, granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and fighter in a holy war. During the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989–1997), enforcement of the dress code eased. Women began to wear slightly less drab outer garments, and within this climate of quasi-liberalization, revolutionary pronouncements were gradually painted over with commercial advertisements.

Removing slogans from public spaces implied a distance from the revolutionary spirit of the first decade. Iran also stepped back from the radical desexualization of the public sphere that had occurred after 1979. In terms of state policies, efforts to adapt Islamic practices to contemporary personal demands replaced the

fervor of revolutionary puritanism. A controversial example is the license for temporary marriage, advocated by Rafsanjani in a Friday prayer ceremony as an appropriately Islamic means of dealing with delayed marriage (for young people) or lack of marriage partners (for war widows and veterans). In spite of this official toleration, temporary marriage was not popularly accepted as legitimate redress of sexual needs, and was especially scorned by youth. Many Islamic feminists—revolutionaries who argued that outstanding questions of women’s rights could be resolved through proper interpretation of Islamic law—opposed the practice as a hazardous quick fix that culminated in women’s sexual objectification and prostitution. From a secular feminist perspective, as well, temporary marriage was humiliating to women. Both secular and religious families rejected it as a practical option for their daughters.

Table 4: Mean Age at First Marriage

	Total Men	Total Women	Urban Men	Urban Women	Rural Men	Rural Women
1966–1967	25.0	18.4	25.6	19.0	24.4	17.9
1976–1977	24.1	19.7	25.1	20.2	22.7	19.1
1986–1997	23.6	19.8	24.2	20.0	22.6	19.6
1991–1992	24.6	20.9	24.9	21.0	23.5	20.8
1996–1997	25.6	22.4	26.2	22.5	24.5	22.3

Lunar years as per the Islamic calendar. Source: Statistical Center of Iran

Secular families did not need to rely on a religiously legitimated form of courtship, since they usually afforded their children the freedom to socialize with the opposite sex in the family home. Despite the official sanction, religious families did not willingly allow their virgin daughters to enter into temporary marriages, which they still considered a disreputable practice that could compromise possibilities for a more permanent union. Temporary marriage was mostly seen as a prop for male privilege in terms of both gender and class, since it provided for informal but legitimate sexual relationships, not with women from the same class status who might be in a position to demand full marriage and a well-defined marriage contract, but with women from lower social and economic ranks who would be grateful for what they could get. The case of temporary marriage was therefore indicative of a new tolerance for both sexuality and class distinctions in the post-war era, combined with a renewed emphasis on women's passivity. In religious books, on television and in speeches, the woman-warrior Zaynab gave way to the model of Fatima, Zaynab's mother and the Prophet's daughter, as a representation of utmost feminine conservatism.

Within contemporary Iranian society, there are at least three competing and overlapping discourses of sexuality: the government's citation of Islamic law and Shi'i jurisprudence; the conventions of social practice; and the attitudes of the emerging younger generation, which are also a product of interactions between the conventional and religious discourses. The binary relation of female passivity to male activity is the most important similarity among the three. Among youth, as well as their parents and the clerical establishment, women are said to be more affectionate and self-sacrificing than men, and

to have fewer problems in controlling and suppressing their physical desires. The resilience of such conservatism, which can coexist with greater toleration for and even expectations of women's participation in sexual relations, helps explain some of the apparently contradictory outcomes of competition between the discourses. Temporary marriage, which would have seemed to offer a religiously legitimate means of negotiating the oppressive enforcement of sexual segregation, could not escape the moral judgments of convention toward what was popularly regarded as religiously sanctioned prostitution, or the resentment of the young, who disdained what they saw as a false compromise with their demands for individual (sexual and social) freedoms.

Intimate Experiences

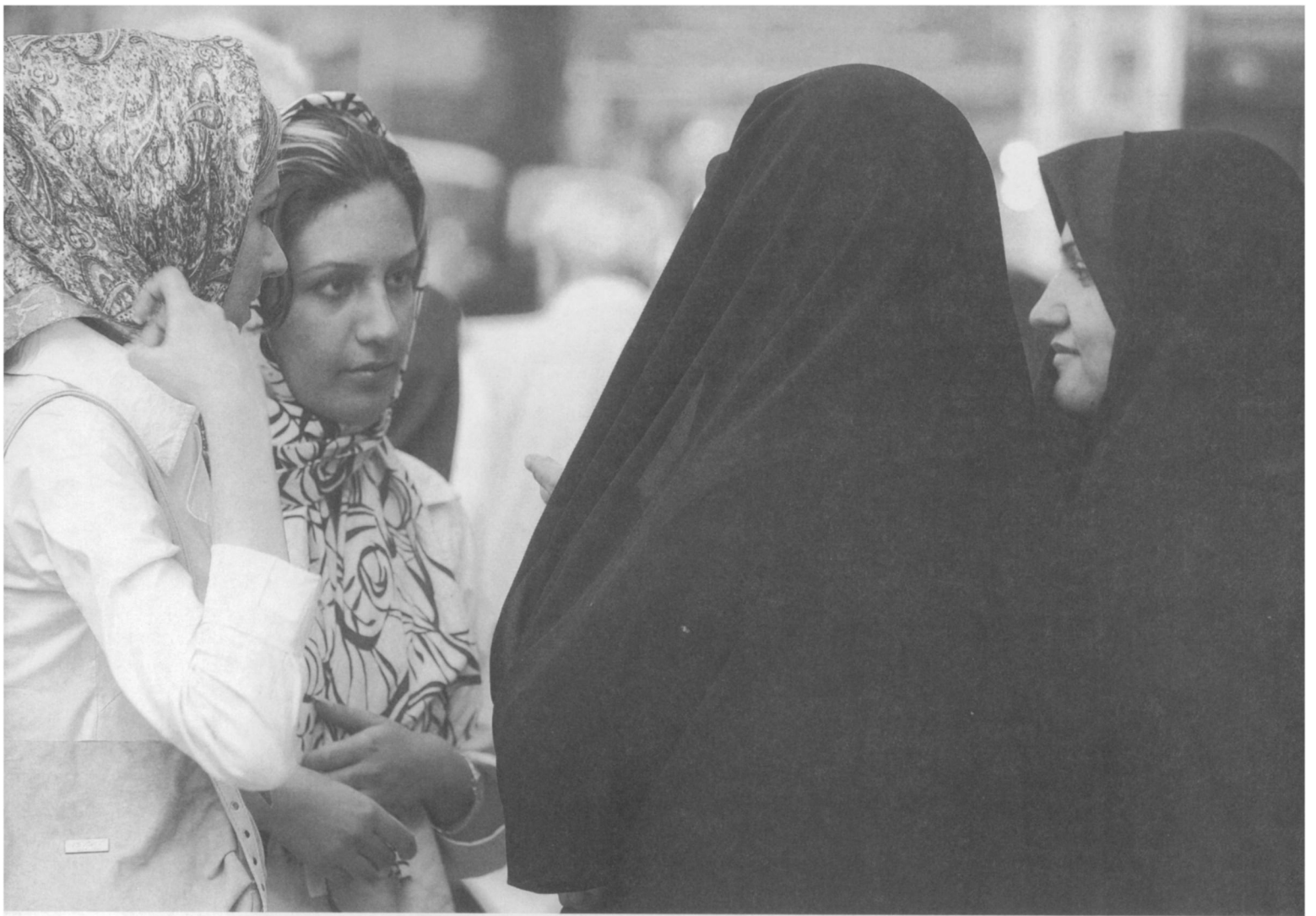
The domain of private affairs is also a domain of power, where sexual self-expression, especially female sexual desire, is expected to be more ambiguous and less articulate. A woman's honor, it is commonly held, dictates that she not say what she wants. This contradictory passivity is evident in the efforts of young women to manage the terms of their participation in public activities. Many young women who rigorously observe the Islamic dress codes offer surprisingly assertive justifications for shielding themselves from the sexualized gaze. In their experience, being active in workplaces and universities means encountering the insecurity of unwanted sexual attention. In the words of one young woman: "Being involved in such activities means that you have wide contacts with boys, who are not capable enough to sexually control themselves. They may allow themselves to say anything to you and behave as they wish. Wearing a chador means that they don't allow themselves to do as they wish." For these young women, the chador constitutes a refusal to withdraw from mixed public spaces and an attempt to bring the sanctuary of religious identity into social interactions.

Other young people appropriate formerly circumscribed religious spaces, such as the Ashura ceremonies in Tehran residential streets. Conventionally limited to male religious organizations, the ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson have become an opportunity for young people to dress up and mingle during all-night "Hussein parties," as they call the open-air parades and performances.

Table 5: Mean Age Difference at First Marriage

	Total Population	Urban	Rural
1966–1967	6.6	6.6	6.5
1976–1977	4.4	4.9	3.6
1986–1997	3.8	4.2	3.0
1991–1992	3.7	3.9	2.7
1996–1997	3.2	3.7	2.2

Lunar years as per the Islamic calendar. The total population numbers are derived by calculating age difference of mean age at first marriage between total men and total women, not by averaging urban and rural mean age difference. Source: Statistical Center of Iran



Tehran police reprimand women for flouting the dress code.

ALFRED/SIPA

But these changes in lifestyle, language and dress are not necessarily acts of collective or individual resistance. Although they have distanced themselves from political Islam and formal Shi'i institutions like polygamy and temporary marriage, Iranian young people's approach to sexual desire and pleasure retains a deeply conventional romanticism. Young women may be more self-conscious and more supportive of formal women's rights than their mothers, but their apparent feminism lacks a critical perspective on intimate personal relations.

The younger generation certainly engages in behavior that would have been regarded as insolent or dishonorable by previous generations. Widespread public displays of heterosexual affection, including kissing, flirting and horseplay, and even religious girls and boys "hanging out" together, mark the new generation as pleasure seekers. But the experience of sexuality remains male-dominated, even as sexual practices have become freer. Young women find themselves caught between the conventions of feminine sexual virtue and the youth discourse of sexual freedom, which nonetheless includes a strong element of the sexual double standard. For most older Iranians, whether religious or secular, virginity was the hallmark of a woman's modesty. Although this attitude is mostly shared by the younger generation, it no longer serves as a reliable prophylactic against premarital sexual activity.

Instead, pressured by young male friends to have sex, girls who say no report being accused of frigidity and "needing to see a psychiatrist." Unmarried young people can rely on physical alternatives to vaginal intercourse, and even virginity is not irretrievably lost, thanks to the proliferation of doctors willing to repair the hymen. But young women across the religious spectrum complain of the sexual saturation of the youth public sphere, including the real spaces of parks and shopping areas and the virtual spaces of Internet chat rooms and blogs.

Sexual experiences in private are not necessarily less confining. The post-revolutionary Islamization of public space meant that heterosexual social relations moved indoors. The prohibition of so-called illegitimate relationships led many young people to invite friends into the family home, preferring the annoying supervision of indulgent parents (the flexible limits of social convention) to the repressive control of state authorities (the rigid enforcement of religious law). This reversal of the traditional public/private dichotomy, by which the private became the sphere of freedom and the public the sphere of control, is popularly supposed to have resulted in increased sexual precocity and promiscuity among the new generations. But perhaps especially within private family space, conventional assumptions about appropriate masculine



Graffiti advertises a local Internet café in Isfahan.

ED GILES

and feminine sexual roles are dominant. Some families still regard any unmarried heterosexual socializing as an insult to the sacred home. In many families, while the males are left free to conduct their social and sexual affairs within the relatively secure borders of their family's or their own private apartments, the females are more restricted. In both secular and religious families, young women are expected to be less economically independent and their social behavior is more carefully scrutinized. To the extent that boys are hosting girls but girls are not hosting boys, the problem is that girls are less able to manage their relations in space under their own control. Sons invite their girlfriends, who may well be tolerated but are not necessarily regarded as daughters of the house. Daughters meet their boyfriends outside the family home, in public and private spaces that they experience as less secure.

This relatively recent development raises the question of whether many contemporary young women, who seem to be so much more liberated and modern in their behavior than previous generations, are also experiencing more sexual violence, given the fact that private spaces are still mostly under male control. The domestication of heterosexual social relations would seem, ironically, to be more costly for young women, who are financially and socially much less privileged than

young men. Without the fallback option of virginity or the physical security of the family home, young women negotiate more open sexual relations on a very uneven playing field.

In a situation of unequal but relatively free gender relations, young women need to maximize what resources they have. Often, this means the cultivation of the modern versions of traditional feminine charms: fashion, makeup, sex appeal. The quickest way for girls to distinguish themselves in the eyes of boys is by differentiating themselves from other girls through dress. The ubiquitous *bad hejab* on Tehran streets may be the pride of regime critics, but the young women themselves complain about the social pressure to wear ever shorter, tighter, outer garments, and regard many of their peers' self-presentations as going "too far." Without an organic feminist critique of male-centered social and sexual standards, young women compete against each other, and criticize each other, in a vicious cycle that benefits men.

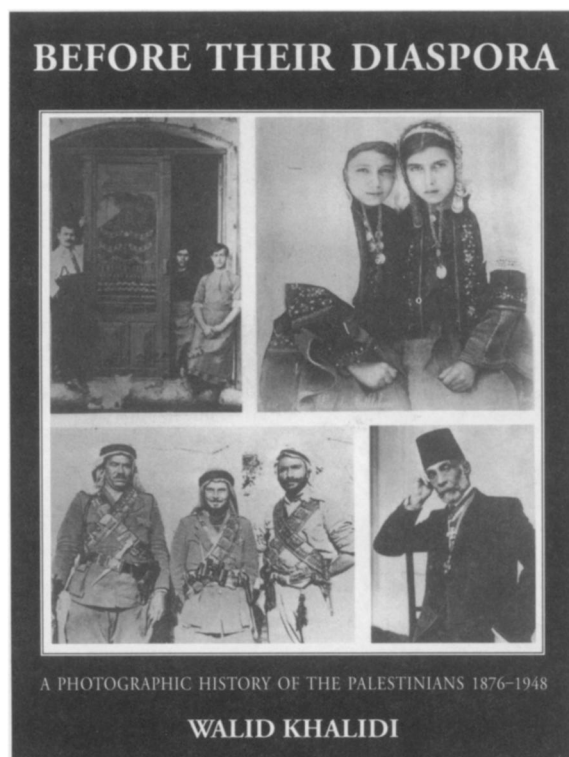
Correction

Two photos in MER 240 (Fall 2006) were miscredited. The photo on p. 6 should have been credited to UPI/Landov. The photo on p. 24 should have been credited to Yannis Behrakis/Reuters/Landov. We regret the errors.

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Neither Equal Citizens nor Rebels

It is ironic that the "sons and daughters of Khomeini" are most fully experiencing the social reality of an Iranian sexual liberation on masculine terms. For women, the prospect can be even more daunting than the old-fashioned restrictions of the past. If the early Islamic Republic was patriarchal, it was also puritan, while contemporary Iranian society combines "liberated" attitudes toward social freedom with masculinist conceptions of social morality, under the watchful gaze of a patriarchal Islamist state.

Young Iranian women are, for the most part, no longer confined to the house or forbidden to go to school by older male heads of household protecting the family honor. They are active, mobile, literate and skeptical of conventional authority. They have more control over their fertility than previous generations, and are more widely accepted as an integrated part of public life. But they are neither equal citizens before the law nor self-conscious rebels against internalized gender norms. Rather, like modern youth everywhere, they often find themselves rejecting the models of their parents without being able to identify alternative interests of their own. Dissatisfied with the social, political and material limits of a revolution not of their own making, they have embraced new behaviors and new trends, emancipating themselves from their parents' moral and political projects. But they have not necessarily emancipated themselves from the specifically modern versions of traditional inequalities.

Like modern young women everywhere, young Iranian women face a constant challenge to balance their individual gender identity on a knife edge of approbation and dismay. Rejecting the traditional Islamic conception of patriarchal authority (and its corollary obligation of the man to respect the honor of the woman), but without an indigenous modern conception of feminine power (i.e., feminism), these young women find themselves free to experience the insidious double standard of their own and their society's masculinist orientation. This is the recognizably modern version of gender inequality: the right of the woman to be held accountable for her own relative lack of power. ■

Endnotes

1 Bernard Hourcade, "Iran: From Social to Political Change?" paper presented at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 16, 2004.

2 Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud and Marie Ladier-Fouladi, *Survey of the Social, Cultural and Economic Situation of Families* (Tehran and Paris: Statistical Center of Iran/Monde Iranien, 2002). Select data from this survey of 6,960 households and 30,715 individuals, conducted in all the provinces of Iran, is available online at <http://www.ivry.cnrs.fr/iran>. For an overview of the survey results, see Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of the Patriarchal Order," *Iranian Studies* 38/1 (March 2005).

3 In terms of birth rates, the biggest difference is between literate women (2.5 children) and illiterate women (6.5 children). Among women with different levels of education, the differences are less striking: Women with a primary school education had 2.8 children, while those with a university degree had 1.3 children. Hourcade, p. 3, referring to *Survey* data.