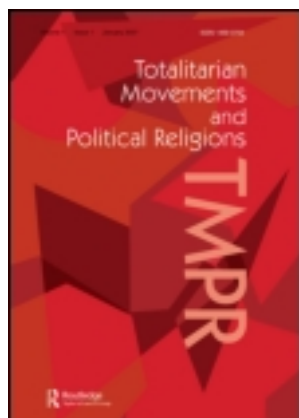


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The Piety of Public Participation: The Revolutionary Muslim Woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran

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ABSTRACT *The ‘woman question’ played a central role in the rhetoric and debates surrounding the Islamic Revolution in Iran, yet the precise outcome of the woman question is still debated. While some scholars argue that the revolution has repressed women by forcing them into traditional roles, others argue that the revolution has liberated women by mobilising them in the public sphere. This article claims that the revolution tried to create a female subject who was simultaneously pious and politically active, and that the creation of this particular subjectivity exceeds and defies the categories and dichotomies of earlier scholars. To make this claim, the article utilises both an intellectual history of ‘the woman question’ and the interpretivist trends of women themselves, showing how the ideal, revolutionary Islamist woman was discursively produced and enforced. This unique subjectivity gives rise to a productive tension in that women are using this new identity to act in ways that are both beyond and contrary to what the Islamist regime initially anticipated. In this way, the subjectivity has destabilised so-called Islamic norms as well as the legitimacy of the regime itself.*

For many observers, the contemporary Iranian woman embodies a paradox. She is highly educated but is also subjected to one of the most discriminatory personal status laws in the modern Middle East. She came out en masse to support Ayatollah Khomeini’s project in 1979 but has since been a major voice calling for reform of so-called Islamic policies. She projects an image to Western audiences of a subservient, traditional Muslim woman, but contributes to one of the strongest women’s movements in the Middle East. Since the Islamic Revolution, many writers have attempted to explain this perplexing and often contradictory figure. Various dichotomies – religious vs. secular, Muslim vs. West, indigenous vs. foreign, traditional v.s. modern – have been utilised in an effort to place Iranian women on one side or another of these Manichean categories. However, such accounts often fail to adequately assess both the degree of women’s agency in the making of the Islamic Republic and the variegated resistance to so-called Islamic codes and rules.

In recent years, some scholars have attempted to move away from the overly simplistic ‘tradition vs. modernity’ analysis by recognising the role that the Islamic government has played in both pushing women back into their homes and mobilising their presence in the public sphere. A common interpretation is

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that the Islamic government tried to return women to their homes with policies that were predicated on the belief that women's natural roles are as wives and mothers and thus they should not participate the public sphere.¹ After the 1979 revolution, and especially during the Iran–Iraq war when more bodies were needed for practical economic and social needs, the government acquiesced for political expediency, and allowed women to enter active, public roles on the condition that they adhere to a strict Islamic system of modesty, including dress codes and gender segregation.² Others argue that women forced their way back into public life after the revolution, refusing to go back to being passive housewives after sacrificing so much for the victory against the Shah.³

In either interpretation, women's presence in political, economic and social activities was not so much prohibited as conditioned on Islamic virtues – individual morality, family interest, social expedience and natural gender appropriateness.⁴ Therefore Islamic norms of womanhood generally restricted women's mobility and agency. However, this interpretation, I argue, obscures the fact that the same leaders who promoted compulsory veiling were also the ones to encourage women's education, work and social participation.⁵ In this light, the veil became a means to social activism, as women who adopted the regimentation that the Islamic state required of them were in turn endowed with the legitimacy to make claims on the Islamic state.⁶ These accounts also tend to palliate the fundamental role gender relations have played in the construction of the Islamic state, and the will and participation of women in both maintaining and resisting this construction.

In this paper, I argue that the restrictions placed on women in the post-revolutionary order cannot be analytically separated from their mobilisation in the public sphere. In fact, a main strategy of power for the Islamist regime can be found not in forcing women back into the home, but in mobilising them both in the home and in the street as revolutionary Islamist women. This is not to say that there were no unintended consequences surrounding the Islamic state's policy towards women. In fact, I argue that as soon as women entered the public sphere, the ideology surrounding their political subjectivity was radically destabilised.

¹F. Azari, 'Islam's Appeal to Women in Iran: Illusion and Reality', in F. Azari (ed.) *Women of Iran: The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), pp. 1–71; Guity Nashat (ed.) *Women and Revolution in Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983); Eliz Sanasarian (ed.) *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1982); Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (eds) *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1982).

²Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (eds), *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994); A. Najmabadi, 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran', in Deniz Kandyoti (ed.) *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), pp. 48–76.

³Homa Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroads of Secularisation and Islamisation* (London: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1999); Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr, *Can Women Act as Agents of Democratisation of Theocracy in Iran?* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2009); Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggles in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994); Arzoo Oslanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); N. Ramazani, 'Women in Iran: Revolutionary Ebb and Flow', *Middle East Journal*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 409–428.

⁴A. Najmabadi, 'Power, Morality and the New Muslim Womanhood', in M. Weiner and A. Banuazizi (eds) *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), p.379.

⁵Ramazani, op. cit., p. 424.

⁶Oslanloo, op. cit., p. 192.

The presence of women as a major reformist force is as much a product of hegemonic gender discourses as it is a critique of them. I will take Juan Linz's characterisation of totalitarian regimes and Michel Foucault's⁷ analytic of biopower as my points of departure in order to demonstrate how the Islamic civic body⁸ was formed through the creation of an active, participatory Islamic female subject. Linz notes that totalitarian regimes⁹ require citizen participation in and active

⁷Some may find it strange that I apply Foucaultian notions of biopower to the case of women in Iran, given Foucault's very public and controversial statements in support of the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath. Several scholars have dealt with Foucault's specific writings on the Iranian Revolution with much more depth and diligence than I can do in these few pages. See, for instance, Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); M. Leezenberg, 'Power and Political Spirituality: Michel Foucault on the Islamic Revolution in Iran', in John Neubauer (ed.) *Cultural History After Foucault* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999); and G. Stauth 'Revolution in Spiritless Times: An Essay on Michel Foucault's Enquiries into the Iranian Revolution', in Barry Smart (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments* (London: Routledge 1994). Indeed this paper is neither a celebration of Foucault's theories nor an effort to undermine his claims or 'prove him wrong.' Rather, I am inspired by Foucault's ideas on biopower and normalisation and wish to explore how they would apply to a case like Iran. One might readily point out that Foucault was discussing a fundamentally *Western bourgeois* discourse, and thus the application of this analysis to non-Western cultures may be unfair and misguided. However, to this I would counter that Foucault was explaining the origins and transformations of the modern biopolitical nation-state, and many post-colonial scholars have pointed out that even Third-World anti-imperial struggles incorporate familiar models of state-building in order to demonstrate their modernity as coherent nations. Thus even the most seemingly 'anti-Western' states, e.g. Iran, have been deeply influenced by modern technologies of power as described by Foucault. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Dinesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

⁸I find Mino Moallem's concept of the 'civic body' helpful in analyzing the process of Iranian state building. The civic body refers to 'an abstract body that is made public and politicized in a way that displays the connections between individual and collective identities, and that is marked as a place of inclusion or exclusion'. The civic body imagines an abstract citizenry as well as the qualifications to become such a citizen. Thus the civic body creates boundaries that demarcate who are inside and who are outside, who are considered 'we' and what makes such a collective fraternity discursively possible. These boundaries not only rationalize and normalize this logic of identity and belonging, but also conceal ambiguity, heterogeneity and factionalism that may exist in society, especially along race and class lines. I use the notion of the civic body when investigating the discursive construction of the modern Iranian political community in its various forms. As will be made clear by the following sections, who was considered 'inside' and 'outside' the Iranian civic body changed dramatically before and after the Revolution, and this was a product of certain discursive changes that I argue revolved around gender and sexuality. See Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 29; and M. Moallem, 'Universalisation of Particulars: The Civic Body and Gendered Citizenship in Iran', *Citizenship Studies*, 3:3 (1999), p. 322.

⁹Owing to the highly polemical connotations that accompany the label 'totalitarian', many observers have accused the Islamic Republic of Iran of being totalitarian regardless of whether that regime fits the characterisation or shares something with other totalitarian regimes. Such labels serve less as useful analytic tools and more as general insults, meant to refer to any state that is broadly 'bad' or 'evil'. As a result, many social scientists have been hesitant to refer to the Islamic Republic as a totalitarian regime for fear of associating themselves with such punditry. It is not my intention to diagnose the Islamic Republic as 'totalitarian' or comment on the degree to which its institutions are democratic. Instead, I wish to focus on the aspect of revolutionary discourse that negates the possibility of passive obedience and apathy to the new social order, or retreat into the role of 'parochial' and 'subjects', particularly when it comes to women. Why would the Islamic Republic require such mass participation, especially of women? What interests did that mobilisation serve, and what did it do? The work of Linz and others on totalitarian regimes, I find, is helpful in our investigation of such questions. It should also be noted that the debate on the degree to which the Islamic Republic fits a totalitarian model is not discussed in the halls of Western academic institutions; it is also fervently debated within Iran today.

mobilisation for political and collective social tasks.¹⁰ This observation is helpful when investigating why women's participation was necessary for the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.

The frame of biopower becomes useful when we recognise that in the modern nation-state, a cohesive civic body depends on stable boundaries separating the inside from the outside that rationalise and normalise a logic of identity and belonging. A term first developed in Foucault's *History of Sexuality I*, biopower refers to a technology of power that governs the individual body as well as the health, education and welfare of the entire population. Biopower was crucial to the emergence of the modern nation-state as it was a seemingly innocuous but a potentially invasive and efficient form of social control. In contrast to the pre-modern, monarchical forms of power characterised mainly by the traditional sovereign's right to kill, biopower puts emphasis on the right of the social body to ensure, maintain or develop its life via individual bodies – in the 'how' to live. This shift marks the center of the bourgeois project of self-cultivation and the new, modern political community that was involved in everlasting war and social struggle. Through biopower and technologies of sex, the state was charged with the job of insuring the survival of the civic body by ridding the community of the 'internal enemy' – the degenerate, the abnormal – in order to maintain its purity, political energy and biological vigor. Discursive production of unsuitable participants in the body politic developed alongside the increased bio-policing of internal sexual and cultural borders. This included policies of 'incessant purification' that were 'codified as necessary and noble pursuits to ensure the well-being and very survival of the social body by a protective state'.¹¹

In the Islamic Republic, the female body was used to define these boundaries – the inside and outside of the nation – using a revolutionary Shi'a ideology as the primary discourse to justify totalising policies controlling women's bodies, sexuality, and movement. By building a revolutionary Islamic female subjectivity through the use of modern biopolitical technologies, the Islamic Republic was able to shape the new Islamic political community upon which their legitimacy as a 'culturally authentic' regime was based. This required not only an 'Islamic' subject, but an active and participatory female citizen.¹² The combination of these two characteristics in the form of the new Iranian woman instantly destabilised

¹⁰Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), p. 70. This mass mobilisation and participation is possible by virtue of the tendency of totalitarian regimes toward the destruction of the line between state and society and the emergence of a 'total' politicisation of society, culture, and the family. 'The shaping of the individual, the internalisation by the mass of the citizens of the ideology, the realisation of the "new man" [and "new woman"] by which ideologists talk' characterize such totalizing politicisation (insertion my own).

¹¹For a helpful discussion of biopower in the context of imperialism, see Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). For feminist interpretations of Foucault, see: M. Deveaux, 'Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault', *Feminist Studies*, 20:2 (1994), pp. 223–247; Susan Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1990); Jane Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹²Cf. G. Mehran, 'The Creation of the New Muslim Woman: Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Convergence* 24:4 (1991), pp. 42–52.

the construction of radical Islamic womanhood and thus the entire Islamic political community.¹³

Historical Context: Gender and State Building in Modern Iran

Throughout the twentieth century, state building and the construction of the civic body provided the context in which women's position and status were seen as important social and political issues in Iran. In the history of Iran's conflicted efforts to construct modern civic bodies, the figure of the 'woman' has been used again and again as an over-determined sign of the social body, a pillar of the nation itself. Since the dissolution of the Qajar dynasty in 1925, all three regimes that have assumed power of Iran – that is, those established by Reza Shah Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic – placed gender and sexual policies and rhetoric at the heart of their overall programmes for state-building. Although these feminine subjectivities differed in important ways, they were all infused with the responsibility to maintain the integrity of the political community. Thus ideologies surrounding women's social and familial position were continually linked to the status of the nation, and each process of nation-building was consistently and fundamentally gendered.¹⁴

The primary set of concerns by Iranian political and scholarly elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was how to transform what they saw as a backward society into a modern nation-state. Subscribing to European civilisation as the model paradigm, these elites saw the modernisation of Iran and a new era of material well-being and progress as their all-encompassing objectives.¹⁵ The state under Reza Shah set out to transform Iran from a dependent, traditional society to a modern, independent nation-state with Europe as its model. Central to this was the development of modern 'technologies' that allowed the state itself to act an instrument of social reform. In a discursive process that reminds us distinctly of Foucaultian notions of biopower, the state assumed responsibility for the welfare and education of the population, thereby adopting a centralist and disciplinary approach to governance.¹⁶ Although Europe was certainly a model to be emulated, the idea of a unique Iranian nation, with its own autonomous identity and glorious past, was discursively shaped at this time by the Iranian intelligentsia and policy-makers. Women were seen as key to this nationalist project not only because of the supposed linkages between modernity and women's public participation and education, but also because of the widely held view that women trained the next generation of citizens as mothers and were thus the bearers of

¹³This article primarily discusses a form of subjectivity that I argue became hegemonic within revolutionary Islamist discourse. I do not wish to imply that this was the *only* form of subjectivity embodied by Iranian women, or that important distinctions relating to class, race, ethnicity, geography and other position were irrelevant in the making of the contemporary Iranian woman. However, due to space constraints, I have focused primarily on the idea touted in many official documents of the Islamic Republic, including the Constitution, that requires women to be both 'Islamic' and 'participatory'.

¹⁴M. Afkhami, 'Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran: a Feminist Perspective', in Afkhami and Friedl, *op. cit.*; Z. Sullivan, 'Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformation in Twentieth-Century Iran', in Lila Abu-Lughod (ed.) *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁵A. Najmabadi, 'Iran's Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order', *Middle East Journal*, 41:2 (1987), pp. 202–217; Sullivan, *op. cit.*; N. Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam in Contemporary Political Discourse in Iran', *Feminist Review*, 44 (1993), pp. 3–18.

¹⁶Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', *op. cit.*, pp. 4–5.

culture and national identity.¹⁷ As a result, the bodies of women became a political terrain on which the transformation of society took place and the new, modern civic body was constructed.¹⁸

The most obvious example of this transformation was the 1936 decree banning the veil in public space. Taking inspiration from a 1934 visit to Atatürk's Turkey, Reza Shah Pahlavi associated the veil with anachronistic religious and traditional elements in society, and an impediment to the secularism that modernity required.¹⁹ Banning the veil was also part of an overall programme forcing the emancipation of women, one that also included expanded opportunities for education and public participation, but excluded meaningful political and economic rights.²⁰ These policies, particularly the abolition of the veil, were met with fierce opposition by the Shi'a clergy, or *'ulama*, who were largely marginalised from governing structures. The clergy did, however, maintain their legitimacy and influence among large sectors of the people, especially the poor and others who did not enjoy the fruits of modernisation.²¹ As a result of this continued influence, the Pahlavi state allowed the clergy to maintain its 'traditional' control over the realm of the family, a policy that was not seen as a contradiction to the modernisation agenda due to the secularist notion of a public/private divide. This was reflected in the dominant legal construction of women as social participants, educated mothers and subservient wives.²²

By the end of Reza Shah's regime, his modernisation policies resulted in neither meaningful economic reform nor political independence from European colonial powers.²³ In addition, the project of social modernisation was incomplete and, as Nayereh Tohidi claims, incoherent, introducing new conflicts and contradictions.²⁴ In addition, the Shah's ruthless and dictatorial policies had alienated much of the secular and Islamic forces who once again rallied around the demands of constitutional rule in Iran.²⁵ After the abdication of Reza Shah, his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979) established the second Pahlavi state, continuing the same pattern of brutal political repression, modern nation-building and surrender to Western interference. Western political and economic intervention in

¹⁷Najmabadi, 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit.; and A. Najmabadi, 'Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran', in Lila Abu-Lughod (ed.) *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). The idea that women craft the nation is not limited to Iran; see Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

¹⁸This is not unique to Iran. In what Foucault calls the 'discourses of modernity', the axis of power is placed firmly on 'the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission'. The body thus becomes a 'political field', inscribed and constituted by power relations, a site where culture and politics act on individuals to turn them into subjects. See M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); transl. Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 25.

¹⁹Ironically, the abolition of the veil in many cases hindered women's status by decreasing mobility among religious women.

²⁰Afkhami, op. cit.; Najmabadi 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit.; Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²¹Hoodfar and Sadr, op. cit., p. 4; Sullivan, op. cit.

²²Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', op. cit., p. 5.

²³Nikki Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', op. cit.

²⁴N. Tohidi, 'Modernisation, Islamisation, and Gender in Iran', in Val Moghadam (ed.) *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies* (London: Zed Books/Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 113.

²⁵Keddie, op. cit.

Iran's domestic affairs reached their height in 1953, when British and American forces activated a *coup d'état* against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who championed the causes of nationalising oil and constitutional rule. Once Mosaddeq was overthrown, the rule of Muhammad Reza Shah was consolidated by British and American forces, who materially benefited from his state.²⁶

Muhammad Reza Shah continued his father's project of state-run modernisation, using gender policies as a main strategy towards the formation of a modern Iran.²⁷ Yet his power took a decidedly different tone from that of his father; whereas his father viewed himself as the head of state, Muhammad Reza Shah saw himself *as* the state. Increased oil revenues allowed the Shah to rule more autonomously from civil society, as the limited level of political participation from social elites fell drastically.²⁸ Correspondingly, the Shah's attitude towards women was one of 'progressive benevolence'. Whereas the modern woman symbolised the modernity of the state under Reza Shah Pahlavi, the modern woman was reflective of the *Shah's* modernity under Muhammad Reza Shah. In the words of one commentator, 'Pahlavi gender policy did not aim to remove patriarchal relations, simply to modernize them'.²⁹ This was reflected in the Family Protection Laws of 1967 and 1975, which attempted to improve women's status within the family while continuing to construct women as male property.³⁰ Even while much of the public interpreted the Shah as a puppet or pawn of Western powers, his 'emancipation' of women was framed as a personal endowment, autonomous from what women wanted or pushed for at the time. As such, the state claimed to 'liberate' women while at the same time alienating much of the oppositional forces, including secular opposition, with its repressive rule. As a result, both secular and religious camps associated the gender policies of the Shah with dictatorship, imperialism and political repression.

Pre-Revolutionary Discourse: Cultural Imperialism, *Gharbzadegi* and Islamic Alternatives

The grand narrative of modernisation, progress and development touted by the Shah's regime incited the emergence of another story, one fuelled by the rage of those marginalised by incoherent modernisation and that eventually led to the events of the Islamic Revolution. These revolutionary forces including a range of multiply determined subjects, from the secular intellectual critical of the Shah's Western, consumer-driven capitalism to the displaced traditional villager and marginalised *'ulama*. However, while the opposition consisted of a wide political spectrum, they were all part of a new political discourse that questioned the Shah's ideological construction of the modern civic body, and women's role in that construction.

The rejuvenation of Islam as 'the ideology of authenticity' was a response to the perceived failures of Western ideologies of nationalism, modernisation and socialism, as well as secular Third-World intellectual movements that countered Western hegemony by mimicking it. As Afsaneh Najmabadi puts it, 'the anti-imperialism

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Sullivan, op. cit., p. 223.

²⁸Najmabadi 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit., p. 58; Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran*, op. cit.

²⁹Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', op. cit., p. 6.

³⁰Sansarian, op. cit.; Paidar op. cit.

of the radical secular left was itself tainted by the West' according to many in the opposition.³¹ This failure was most compactly conceptualised in the phrase 'cultural imperialism', which for many revolutionary intellectuals represented the root of Iran's problems as well as 'the greatest conspiracy in humanity'. In its most general sense, cultural imperialism aimed to deprive Third World nations of their character and traditional values – and thus any capacity for resistance – in order to allow Western powers to economically exploit those nations.³² Islam here represented a crisis of identity, a 'cultural retrospection' in the face of material misery brought on by modernity.³³ The appeal to 'authenticity', in the form of an idealised, indigenous, pre-colonial past, countered what was seen as the 'inauthentic' – Western values and culture that were violently imposed for economic and political domination.³⁴

Although the revolutionary opposition was extremely heterogeneous, there was a shared belief in the importance of women's roles in shaping the social and political order. The 'woman question' came to acquire importance for two reasons. First, because women were so important to the construction of the modern civic body under the Pahlavi states, they were once again taken as the cornerstones of a new political discourse that imagined a different kind of Iranian civic body. Second, in the new revolutionary paradigm, the imperialist domination of Muslim societies was achieved not through military or economic domination *per se*, but the manipulation and undermining of religion and culture. Among the revolutionaries, there was common acceptance of the importance of individual moral behaviour to the health of the civic body; thus they agreed on the community's legitimate prerogative to set the limits of individual moral behaviour.³⁵ Within this framework, both secular and Islamist opposition groups saw moral corruption as the lynchpin of imperialist designs. Although what actually comprised the limits of morality differed drastically depending on who was asked, there was a consensus that women in particular were endowed with the heavy responsibility of retaining the moral and cultural health of the population as mothers. Despite its different interpretations, a certain *kind* of woman was deemed unacceptable in revolutionary discourse, and a certain *kind* of woman was seen as a legitimate participant in the new civic body.

Central to the new political discourse that emerged in the 1960s and 70s was the concept of *gharbzadegi* – westoxification or weststruckness – and the *gharbzadeh* woman. Critic and leftist populist Jalal Al-e Ahmad, the most prominent writer and intellectual of his time, wrote *Gharbzadegi* in 1964, which immediately garnered the acclaim of an entire generation of Iranian radical youth. In its most general sense, *gharbzadegi* implied a rejection of the degeneration of Iranian culture in the name of modernity, which was viewed as inherently imperialistic, exploitative and toxic.³⁶ Nowhere was the critique of *gharbzadegi* so potent than in its rejection of the *gharbzadeh* woman, who came to embody at once all social ills.³⁷

³¹Najmabadi, 'Iran's Turn to Islam', op. cit., p. 206.

³²N. Yeganeh, 'Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in Azar Tabari, and Nahid Yeganeh (eds) *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1982), p. 49.

³³Bassam Tibi, *The Crisis of Modern Islam* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1988), p. 51.

³⁴Moghissi, op. cit., p. 60.

³⁵Najmabadi, 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit., pp. 65–67.

³⁶Tohidi, op. cit., pp. 121–122.

³⁷Najmabadi, 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit.; Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', op. cit.

In its crudest form, the 'westoxified woman' was one who wore too much makeup, a skirt too short and clothes too tight, who laughed too loudly and smoked in public. She was the hyper-consumer of Western goods, a subscriber to imperial ideology and corrupter of Iranian culture. If she worked at all, it was as a secretary in a socially irrelevant sector, and her work was mainly decorative and dispensable. She was preoccupied with the latest fashions and her own appearance, spending hours a day primping herself for a trip to the store. If she read at all, it was limited to romance novels or fashion magazines. She was light-headed, lacking an interest in politics or national issues, making her easy prey for the commoditisation and sexual objectification of Western capitalism.³⁸

The notion of *gharbzadegi* had strong allusions to health and disease. The word itself in Persian connotes the 'struckness' of an illness.³⁹ Al-e Ahmad compared westoxification to cholera, describing it as a disease that afflicted the Iranian people's minds and hearts, stealing the nation's natural resources (especially oil), distorting the nation's identity and culture and degenerating the entire society's moral fabric.⁴⁰ The westoxified woman was the primary vehicle through which this process unfolded. As Tohidi points out, "'westoxification" was the nation's disease, and the Westernized woman, the carrier of its virus'.⁴¹

Yet what was to replace the *gharbzadeh* woman? Two main models emerged: the traditional Islamic woman heralded by Muslim cleric Morteza Motahhari, and the militant revolutionary woman as discussed by Ali Shari'ati. Motahhari argued that, due to their specific biological functions, men and women are physically and psychologically different, and should thus be afforded different rights and responsibilities. His argument rested on two general attributes that characterise Islamic ideals of gender and sexuality. Firstly, women are inherently more emotional than men, and have less inclination towards reason. This is why Islam bans women from participating in *jihad* or occupying juridical positions, and affords different rights to men and women in family and public life. Secondly, sexual activity belongs to the realm of the family, whereas most other social functions (economic, political and cultural activities) belong to the realm of civil society and government. In Motahhari's formulation, the 'social' sphere is governed by man-made laws, whereas the realm of the 'family' is governed by 'natural laws'.⁴² Islam thus places priority on keeping these two kinds of activities separate in their respective spheres. Mixing the two leads to chaos – conflict and emotional neglect in the home, sexual excessiveness and objectification in the public sphere. These ideas should not sound unfamiliar to anyone literate in Western feminist literature, as many European classical liberal thinkers argued

³⁸As many writers have pointed out, this stereotype of the westernized woman serves as the very model Western feminists criticize as the product of women's objectification by patriarchal capitalism. However, this fact was obscured by the *gharbzadegi* discourse, and often 'feminism' was seen as an enabler, not a critique, of such traits.

³⁹The tropes of social health and survival are closely related to Foucault's conception of biopower and the importance of sex to disciplinary regimes. In *History of Sexuality I*, he makes clear that sex is the pivotal factor in the proliferation of discipline and normalisation as techniques of power. Sex is also at the heart of a system of 'dividing practices' that separate off the virulent, contagious elements of society – the insane, delinquent, abject and hysteric – from the good, the useful and the worthy. Such separation and quarantine procedures are necessary, in the modern power paradigm, for the health, purity and basic survival of the legitimate civic body.

⁴⁰Tohidi, op. cit., p. 122.

⁴¹Quoted in Moghissi, op. cit., p. 83.

⁴²Yeganeh, 'Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran', op. cit., p. 45.

along similar lines (e.g. Locke, Rousseau).⁴³ However, where these views diverge from classic liberal attitudes, besides its emphasis on Islam, is around the notion of rights and individualism. The fundamental undercurrent to Motahhari's argument is that Islam grants a right to 'society', which is given priority over the rights of the individual.⁴⁴ The 'right' of society to be protected, nourished and healthy supersedes any individual's right to social activity.

Ali Shari'ati (1933–1975) was another influential figure who integrated 'the woman question' in his critiques of the Shah and Western modernity. Considered by many to be the 'ideologue' of the revolution, his writings and lectures re-interpreted Shi'a Islam as inherently revolutionary, emphasising social justice and providing the basis of unity for modern anti-imperial struggle. Taking inspiration from Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Franz Fanon, Shari'ati reiterated that the contemporary Iranian woman was dehumanised by Western capitalism and turned into a sexual object. However, unlike previous writers, Shari'ati made the clearest discursive link between the westoxification of the Iranian woman and its fundamental implications for the legitimacy and health of the entire nation. Women, says Shari'ati, were the most efficient tool of imperialist oppression, and the easiest path to cultural, political and economic de-territorialisation. This is because women's sexuality is so powerful over men that it serves as capitalism's best tool for exploitation: '[T]o change a traditional, spiritual, ethical or religious society for the sake of an empty, absurd, consuming society [the woman] is changed into an instrument of sexuality in order to change the type of humanity'.⁴⁵ Thus one could reject the socio-economic domination of Iran by rejecting the 'modern woman'.

Shari'ati disparages the 'bourgeois' woman, the 'doll' of Western capitalism, who opens the door to her nation's domination by outside forces. At the same time, however, he also rejects the 'traditional' model of Iranian womanhood, who is so removed from humanity and chained by ignorance that she no longer becomes fit to nourish the next generation. Although he heralds the virtues of motherhood and chastity, Shari'ati rejects the traditions of conservatism, patriarchy and ignorance that he argues are incorrectly premised on such virtues. How can such a person, he asks, 'who is herself incomplete and useless, who is missing a part of her brain and who is excluded from literacy, books, education, discipline, thought, culture, civilisation and social manners ... be worthy of being the nourisher of tomorrow's generation?'⁴⁶

In the place of this woman, Shari'ati imagined another kind of woman more suitable to new, revolutionary society. In *Fatima is Fatima*, he called upon the figure of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, whose conservative image he empowers with agency and revolutionary wrath against the unjust

⁴³Ibid, pp. 52–54. As Yeganeh points out, it is difficult to ignore the similarities between the ideals and arguments presented in these texts and those presented in other Eastern and Western philosophies that deal with the question of gender difference. Such similarity, she argues, suggests that there is nothing specifically 'Islamic' about many of the ideas presented in these Shi'a texts, but they are rather meant to *rationalize* the 'natural' inequality between men and women and are thus heavily influenced by ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, who was heavily present in the curriculum of religious schools during this time.

⁴⁴Ibid, p. 43.

⁴⁵Quoted in Moghissi, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁶Ali Shari'ati, *Fatima Fatima ast*, transl. Laleh Bakhtiar *Fatima is Fatima* (Tehran: The Shari'ati Foundation, n.d.), p. 109.

ruler.⁴⁷ Working within a specifically Shi'a reading of Fatima as martyr-saint and social revolutionary, Shari'ati reintroduced Fatima as a model of the kind of resistance Iran needs not only to displace the unjust Shah, but also to create the new, just political order: a woman who is neither traditional nor Western, who can enter modernity but not lose legitimacy.⁴⁸ The ideal woman, Fatima, is a loyal fighter, the embodiment of love and devotion but a living martyr, selflessly struggling against injustice.⁴⁹ Fatima, Shari'ati argues, was the 'woman' as *true* Islam conceived her (as opposed to the superstitions peddled by backwards clergy): the model daughter, wife, mother, militant and responsible participant in her society.

This argument struck a deep chord not only for radical students and intellectuals but also amongst women of all backgrounds. Unlike Motahhari, Shari'ati makes no clear distinction between the familial and the social. He also rejects what he finds to be a religious obsession with controlling women's sexuality, dress and bodily autonomy. For educated and politically active women such as Zahra Rahnava and Fereshteh Hashemi, Shari'ati urged women not to return to a traditional subjectivity, locked inside their homes, but become active revolutionary subjects. For more religious or traditional women, the Fatima model provided a 'legitimate' political avenue – within a religious framework – to participate in society,⁵⁰ as well as a relatively straightforward guide to proper social behaviour in the context of widespread social change and moral incoherence.⁵¹ The important thing to recognise is that Shari'ati's ideal model of womanhood – one that had severe consequences for both state gender ideology and oppositional movements in the Islamic Republic – required that women be both 'authentic' and 'active.'

Shari'ati's work played a crucial role in the construction of an oppositional cultural and political identity based on a modern narrative organised around Islam. Western capitalism, according to Shari'ati, was able to rob the East by emptying people out of their 'selves'.⁵² Thus the power of the new civic body, according to Shari'ati, lay in the reconstitution of the self as a subversive figure. As opposed to Motahhari, who argued that women are slave to their emotions, Shari'ati placed a great deal of emphasis on the ability of women to 'make' themselves.⁵³ In fact, it is *crucial* for women to do so; if not, they are either pawns to imperialism or ontologically imprisoned by traditionalism. In this way, women are endowed with social responsibility because they are capable of *agency*, namely the agency to 'create' themselves in such a way as to protect the good of society. That is why Shari'ati feels the need to create a model – 'Fatima' – so that women have a guide in their subject formation. This argument had a tremendous impact on the 'woman question' in revolutionary and post-revolutionary discourse, not only because it solidified the importance of women's roles in the health of the

⁴⁷Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 217. Shari'ati draws upon a particularly Shi'a historiography on the figure of Fatima, which is not readily recognizable or accepted for Sunnis, who would draw upon other archetypes for their discussion of ideal Islamic womanhood.

⁴⁸Marcia K. Hermansen, 'Fatima as a Role model in the Works of Ali Shari'ati' in Guity Nashat (ed.) *Woman and Revolution in Iran* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983).

⁴⁹Moghissi, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁵⁰Hoodfar and Sadr, *op. cit.*

⁵¹Tohidi, *op. cit.*

⁵²N. Yeganeh, 'Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 51.

civic body, but also because it inspired women to believe that they had a choice as well as a duty to form their own selves for the good of the nation.

Construction and Enforcement of Revolutionary Islamic Womanhood

Despite their shared appraisal of modesty, motherhood and authenticity, the texts of Motahhari and Shari'ati demonstrated a possible range of positions within Shi'a Islam on the question of women. In the end, the hegemonic model of womanhood touted by Ayatollah Khomeini and other major figures in the Islamic Republic combined elements from both interpretations to form a militant, modest Islamic woman who shared many similarities with versions of ideal womanhood present in other totalitarian ideologies.⁵⁴ In order to see what form of Islamic womanhood became hegemonic, we first need to explore what characterised the new Islamic civic body and how gender identities and performativities grew to be so crucial for its construction.⁵⁵

As we have seen, while notions of modernity, socialism and nationalism served as the bases for previous Iranian oppositional politics, in the post-revolutionary order, *morality* – and particularly sexual morality – was the paradigm by which society should be politicised into a new civic body. The main enemy here was not military disparity, political institutions, or economic structure, as in previous lines of thought, but *moral corruption*. As Khomeini put it:

Even if [the imperialist countries] go to Mars, ... they will not experience happiness, moral virtue, and spiritual exaltation. They will be unable to solve their social problems, because the solution of social problems and the relief of their own miseries require moral solutions, solutions based on faith. Attaining material power of wealth, the conquest of nature and space, all of this cannot cope with these problems. These things need Islamic faith, conviction, and morality to be completed, to be balanced and to serve humanity, rather than to endanger it. We possess this morality, this faith, and these laws.⁵⁶

If political justice in the new order was to be embedded within a moral paradigm, at the heart of this paradigm was *sexual morality and the reproduction of authenticity*. In this way, women were infused with an indispensable political responsibility in Shi'a populism as pillars of the civic body – mother, reproducer and nurturer of the family and nucleus of the nation.⁵⁷ Indeed, as Minoo Moallem observes, the

⁵⁴The obvious similarities between fascism and radical Shi'a Islam (or Shi'a Islamic fundamentalism, as it is sometimes called) enable such comparisons. Unquestioning loyalty of the masses and their faith in authority; the religious cult of personality surrounding the leader with a direct, intimate relationship between him and 'the people'; nostalgia and glorification of the past; the emphasis on sacrifice and martyrdom for the nation; and a mass-based single party system are all noted features of both ideologies. However, while more work needs to be done to compare revolutionary Shi'a ideology and other totalitarian systems, I wish here to focus on those characteristics surrounding the ideal woman in revolutionary Islamic discourse, and the similarities between her subjectivity and that in other totalitarian ideologies. See Moghissi, op. cit., p. 60.

⁵⁵Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁵⁶Quoted in Najmabadi, 'Iran's Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order', op. cit., p. 204.

⁵⁷Afshar, op. cit., p. 77.

naturalness of mothering justified the naturalness of the nation.⁵⁸ At the same time, the immense populism that coloured the revolution required that any policy be framed in terms of 'the good of the people' or 'supported by the populace'. Thus government figures often spoke of the 'right' of society to live morally (and thus the 'right' of the civic body to survive at all), which trumped any individual right to live immorally. If the new Islamic civic body was to be healthy, authentic and prosperous by virtue of its moral purity, all *immoral* or un-Islamic elements had to be removed by the state for the good of the whole.

As a result of this logic, the new 'dividing practices' separating the legitimate from the illegitimate became predicated on what constituted 'Islamic' sexual morality. The perceived responsibility to rid society of all moral corruption (and particularly sexual corruption) served as the fundamental justification for almost every major social policy decision since the revolution, and was enveloped in an overall process of 'Islamisation'. It is important to note that the discourse of Islamisation – what was and was not considered to be 'Islamic' – did not develop in a unified manner. The social policy of the Islamic Republic was not a straight replica of the Qur'an or any other ready-made blueprint. Rather, it was a product of diversity, power struggle, political repression, ideological control, economic stagnation, an eight-year war and international isolation.⁵⁹ What tied diverse viewpoints together, however, was an agreement that the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, including any laws or policies that disseminated from it, rested on the existence of unified, revolutionary Islamic civic body, which by definition necessitated the discursive creation and material elimination of the un-Islamic, the counterrevolutionary and the illegitimate. There was also a consensus that women, as embodiments of social morality, were particularly vulnerable to exploitation by the enemy for political ends and were thus the primary sites of attempted 'counterrevolution' by Western forces who wished to topple the new Islamic regime.⁶⁰

Thus one of the very first tasks after the revolution was the repeal of the Shah's Family Protection Laws, which Khomeini justified in terms of national security, denouncing as an 'irreligious attack on the family' by the enemy.⁶¹ This was part and parcel with an overall 'anti-corruption' campaign that was meant to combat 'cultural counterrevolution' by cleansing the post-revolutionary society of any infiltration of 'Western' gender relations, especially sexual transgressions such as adultery, fornication, prostitution and homosexuality.⁶² In fact, the most extreme measures implemented by the post-revolutionary administration were manifested in these anti-corruption policies, and particularly those that set out to 'protect the Islamic family' by making sex outside of marriage punishable by stoning.⁶³ As the family was turned into a political institution, the violation of laws intended to protect it became a political crime.⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that the

⁵⁸Moallem, *Veiled Sister, Warrior Brother*, op. cit., p. 74. For instance, Khomeini stated that: 'From the lap of woman human beings emerge. The first stage of being true men and women is the lap of the woman. The happiness and wealth of the country depends on woman'. Tabari and Yeganeh, op. cit., p. 101.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Just as the Jews were blamed by German fascists for destroying womanhood in its most 'holy' form, so Khomeini blamed 'ill-willed foreign interests for ordering' the enactment of the Family Protection Laws under the Shah, which he argued would 'break up Muslim homes and family lives'.

⁶¹Afshar, op. cit., p. 77.

⁶²Paidar, op. cit., p. 346.

⁶³Ibid, p. 344.

⁶⁴Ibid, p. 345.

crime of adultery warranted greater punishment than the crime of murder in the Islamic Penal Code (created in 1983), as it was essentially a crime against the state. The new Islamic family law was essentially a collection of traditionalist and conservative interpretations of Islamic doctrine. However, whereas these practices may have been enacted through traditional mechanisms of a patriarchal pre-modern society before 1979, the new civil code took a decidedly modernist turn once it was enforced by a strong, central state.

In addition to the family, women's bodies served as the other primary site upon which 'social cleansing' took place, with special emphasis placed on the elimination of the *gharbzadeh* woman. Women who were deemed *gharbzadeh*, either because they wore too much make-up or refused to don the veil in public, were not only deemed 'un-Islamic' but signified complicity with the Shah and Western imperialists.⁶⁵ They were the living embodiments of imperialism and corruption, parasites that, for the good of the entire population, had to be destroyed. Enforcement of the veil through violence demonstrated clearly early on that individual sexual morality was the prerogative of the state, as it was fundamentally an issue of national security and public health. *Gharbzadegi* was not something that could remain innocuous in society; like a disease, it had to be eliminated for the basic (cultural) survival of the population. The re-adoption of *hijab* (veil) served to 'vaccinate' women and men against the virus of westoxification.⁶⁶ An editorial from *Zan-e Ruz (Today's Woman)* made a clear link between the veil and national survival:

Woman in [Islamic] societies is armed with a shield that protects her against the conspiracies aimed at her humanity, honour and chastity. This shield is verily her veil. For this reason ... the most immediate and urgent task [of the Pahlavis] was seen to be unveiling ... Then she became the target of poisonous arrows of corruption, prostitution, nakedness, looseness, and trivialities. After this, she was used to disfigure the Islamic culture of the society, to erase people's faith and drag society in her wake toward corruption, decay and degeneration.⁶⁷

As this passage demonstrates, compulsory veiling was often framed in terms of military technology and warfare, defending the integrity of the young nation against all 'inauthentic' elements in society.

In this way, the veil did more than just eliminate the 'un-Islamic'; it was a particularly efficient biopolitical device used to 'naturalize' the civic body into something unique, timeless and cohesive by constructing the authentic revolutionary Islamic woman. Like the mother, the Islamic civic body touted by the regime was authentic, indigenous and ahistoric. Thus in order to build such a social body, individual bodies – particularly those of women – had to present an image of authenticity. At the same time, the Islamic civic body – like all civic bodies – had to present an image of unity and homogeneity, palliating all internal divisions along lines of class, race and religion, in order to consolidate its 'true' identity. We see this most clearly in the fact that religious minorities, too, were

⁶⁵Ibid, p. 123.

⁶⁶Tohidi, op. cit., p. 125.

⁶⁷This is a quote from a 1984 *Zan-e Ruz* editorial, in Najmabadi 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit.

subject to forced veiling.⁶⁸ In a similar vein, compulsory veiling was meant to keep wealth, class and beauty disparities hidden, thus concealing any outward sign of class conflict.⁶⁹ In all aspects, the veil manifested the specific 'Islamicness' of the civic body, and thus the justification for Islamic government. There was something about the 'Islamic woman' that was fundamentally different from the 'Other' or 'Western woman'. The veil was used more than just to signify this difference but actually *construct* it.

At this point we can begin to see the importance of active, public participation to the construction of the ideal revolutionary Islamic woman. Although compulsory veiling has often been interpreted as *hindering* women's presence in the public sphere, I would argue that veiling is precisely the means by which the Islamic Republic can require women's public participation as revolutionary Islamic subjects. Whenever the question over women's status in the new Republic was brought up in the post-revolutionary aftermath, Islamist ideologues would repeatedly point to the fact that women came out in droves to support Khomeini and his vision for the new woman: 'No one forced women to come with *hijab* [veil] on demonstrations ... But they themselves felt an Islamic responsibility to make this dress one of their Islamic and Iranian slogans, to show their genuine feelings and to show it to the world'.⁷⁰ In fact, it is generally considered that secular women wore a headscarf or *chador* in revolutionary protests as a sign of opposition to the Shah and not an acceptance of 'Islam in total', because political Islam 'in totality' itself did not exist then.⁷¹ Also conveniently overlooked was the fact that 30,000 women marched on the streets on International Women's Day (8 March 1979) to protest compulsory veiling. Regardless, Islamic leadership brushed off these women as remnants of *gharbza-degi*. The women who donned the veil during revolutionary protests – and they represented 'authentic' women everywhere – were reinterpreted to be supporters of veiling itself and, by extension, the Islamic regime. After the revolution, the veil was subsequently equated with 'Islam in total' by government ideologues: the veil was Islamic; thus to have a truly 'Islamic' society, women should observe *hijab*.⁷²

In the post-revolutionary Islamic discourse, every act of public participation – whether economic, educational, political, cultural or leisure – was only possible by virtue of women's *hijab*. As the *Zan-e Ruz* editorial states: 'Today the Muslim woman has well understood ... that the only way for her social presence to be healthy and constructive is to use her Islamic veil and clothes'.⁷³ Importantly, this social presence is fully inscribed with *political* meaning once it is carried out in Islamic dress. Even the most mundane acts of public participation are not apathetic to politics but are in fact intended to uphold the political order. The editorial continues:

⁶⁸Moallem, p. 114.

⁶⁹Tohidi, op. cit., p. 122.

⁷⁰This is a quote from Ayatollah Taleghani, in Tabari and Yeganeh, op. cit., p. 107.

⁷¹A. Betteridge, 'To Veil or not to Veil: A Matter of Protest or Policy', in Guity Nashat (ed.) *Women and Revolution in Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983); Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran*, op. cit.; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Tabari and Yeganeh, op. cit.; Tohidi, op. cit.

⁷²Yeganeh, 'Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran', op. cit., p. 37.

⁷³This is a quote from a 1984 *Zan-e Ruz* editorial, in Najmabadi 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality', op. cit.

It is clear that an active and effective presence of women ... in many positions such as education, medical professions, higher education is indispensable. So those in authority should prepare the grounds for women's participation in society. Faithful and committed women should expand their abilities in order to be prepared to carry out important social tasks and responsibilities that the Islamic Revolution has placed on their shoulders.⁷⁴

Indeed, compulsory veiling and the public mobilisation of women seemed to go hand-in-hand, rather than represent conflicting interests for the regime. One might expect that if the Islamic Republic needed to absorb more women into the workforce and government positions, especially during the Iran–Iraq war, it would have relaxed its veiling policies. On the contrary, the more women that enter social and political life, the greater the need to enforce veiling and other 'sexual morality' policies in order to safeguard the society's moral fabric from foreign, immoral influences. Thus, as Afsaneh Najmabadi observes, we have seen a '*bad-hijab*' (improper veiling) campaign almost every summer since the revolution in order to root out the smallest disobedience of the moral code, while at the same time prominent politicians such as Rafsanjani and Khomeini continue to expound on the necessity of women's involvement in social and political tasks.⁷⁵

Indeed, public participation was not presented as conflicting with women's Islamic duties but in fact was encompassed within them. Islamic leaders described the revolution as a miracle, giving justice to women from foreign exploitation. As such, women were expected to give thanks to God by 'using all their God-given possibilities and resources to consolidate the Islamic Republic'.⁷⁶ Apathy was not tolerated. By making the veil compulsory, women were forced into the kind of public participation that consolidated the Islamic civic body and held up the Islamic Republic as a legitimate state, regardless of individual women's personal motivations for donning such dress. Indeed, the amalgamation of religion and citizenship made political participation a sacred duty of all citizens.⁷⁷ This kind of participation was seen not as the autonomous agency of subversive femininity, but rather a positive mechanism to bolster masculinity, including political and economic prowess. This helps to explain why, whenever there appears to be a domestic political crisis, the Islamic authorities galvanise women in the public space to their own benefit. Images of women in black chadors, holding up pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini, demonstrating *in favour* of the government, become ubiquitous across government media channels. The presence of women – or rather, a certain *kind* of woman – speaks infinitely louder than the absence of any women at all.

In its clearest manifestation, the vision of the ideal revolutionary Islamic woman was encapsulated in a single image: the woman dressed in a *chador*, with a baby in one hand and gun in another. This figure saturated revolutionary posters and was referred to again and again in post-revolutionary propaganda. In this way, Islamist ideologues could justify women's primary role of motherhood while simultaneously requiring their populist presence: 'Women should be like

⁷⁴Ibid, p. 68.

⁷⁵Ibid, p. 70.

⁷⁶Ibid, p. 68.

⁷⁷Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, op. cit., p. 120.

the women of today, with their babies in their arms, ready to face machine-guns. It is such women who can bring up protesting revolutionary human beings for society'.⁷⁸ This image eventually informed the ideal female subject as presented in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. The document regarded the establishment of an Islamic nation as dependent on the Islamisation of women's position. It constructed the ideal Islamic womanhood in opposition to 'Western values'. It advocated a set of patriarchal relations that consolidated male control over women in the family while granting women the right to actively participate in society. It declared that the new Islamic society would value women as the upholders of the family and the nation, fulfilling their natural instincts as well as their right to participate in social life.⁷⁹

In sum we can say that, in order to maintain its legitimacy as an Islamic state, the new government had to create a truly 'Islamic' society. The Islamisation process entailed two main functions: first, because the West had so thoroughly corrupted Iran's indigenous cultural and religious way of life (a result of *gharbza-degi*), the new state was endowed with the responsibility to 'cleanse' society from Western influences. Second, the state was charged to 'recreate' the authentic subjectivities of the Iranian people. Because of their prominent position in revolutionary rhetoric, women were considered to be severely important in the creation and maintenance of this new Islamic civic body. The radical Islamic woman – mother and revolutionary – was the lynchpin of the new social and political order that placed notions of morality and cultural authenticity at its core. However, even though the new woman was framed as an Islamic alternative to 'alien Western values', it was far from a purely 'Islamic' construct.⁸⁰ Indeed, the same clerics who had opposed women's right to vote on religious grounds in the 1960s were the same ones who urged women to vote as a 'religious duty' 20 years later. In reality, it was the context of revolutionary populism, anti-imperialism and discourse of 'authenticity' – more than Islam itself – that determined the shape and colour of the new Islamic woman.

Unintended Consequences: Destabilising Revolutionary Islamic Womanhood

As we have seen, the participation of women in the public sphere cannot simply be taken as a sign of resistance; indeed, women's participation has been an effective tool for consolidating the power of the Islamic Republic. But it is also important to note that, while the embodiment of the revolutionary Islamic woman – who was both pious and politically visible – on some levels strengthened the ideological core of the new state, it also engendered and exposed a set of contradictions and tensions that led to profound unintended consequences for the Islamic state and women's status within it. Although these consequences are still being documented and absorbed by scholars, this section gives a brief glimpse into how the embodiment of revolutionary Islamic womanhood actually worked to destabilise hegemonic feminine norms.

Many Iranian women wholeheartedly supported the revolution and Khomeini's vision for a new Islamic society that promised a just alternative to the alienating politics of modernisation and industrialism under the Shah. They

⁷⁸This is a quote from President Banisadr in Tabari and Yeganeh, op. cit., p. 111.

⁷⁹Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', op. cit.

⁸⁰Yeganeh, 'Women, Nationalism and Islam', op. cit., p. 9.

were particularly attracted to Khomeini's promise of gender justice that was often alluded to in his revolutionary speeches. In stark contrast to his earlier writings, Khomeini encouraged women to join the anti-Shah demonstrations in the streets. He called upon women to exercise their right to vote for the new Islamic Republic.⁸¹ He approved of female employment and education with proper *hijab*, including professions that were at one time considered uncouth, such as hairdressing and acting.⁸² He urged female supporters to 'enter politics'⁸³ and participate in Islamic societies,⁸⁴ including the newly formed al-Zahra Theological Seminary for women in Qom.⁸⁵ He even encouraged them to join the army and Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards).⁸⁶ He praised 'women [who] would accompany men, the Pasdaran, the Hendarmes, the Armed Services, the whole military, shoulder to shoulder'.⁸⁷ In these speeches, it is clear that Khomeini was asking women to become active citizens, not only by casting motherhood in a political light, but by encouraging women to become visible participants in the new Islamist order.⁸⁸

Many young women – particularly from conservative and religious sectors of society – fully embraced Khomeini's message. As Janet Afary notes, such women had little to fear from the newly implemented moral code; most of them already lived by such norms as dictated by their conservative husbands and fathers.⁸⁹ Some women actually aided the morality police in enforcing the new sexual laws and eliminating the 'modern women' (those deemed 'westoxified') by joining the ranks of the Basij (voluntary paramilitary group). At the same time, while these women had little to lose, they had everything to gain from the new Islamist order. Women supporters of Khomeini interpreted his rhetoric as releasing them from the pre-modern despotism of their husbands and fathers into the legitimate Islamic society enforced by a powerful central state. A young Muslim woman no longer had to weigh her desire for education, public participation, or choice of partner with her religious beliefs. In fact, such a woman could now legitimately defy her traditionalist family and become active in an Islamist organisation, join the war effort, enlist in the women's auxiliary branch of the Basij and even chose her husband from one of the many Islamist young men in her classes rather than submit to an arranged marriage.⁹⁰

Islamist women were not only permitted to enter such roles, they were often publicly heralded for doing so. Women's participation in the war effort – either as member of the Basiji Sisters or especially by raising and sacrificing a martyr son – was considered to be as important, if not more so, than the role of the martyr himself. One popular slogan from the unknown soldier said, 'Sister, your *hijab* is more devastating to the enemy than the shedding of my blood'.⁹¹ While many

⁸¹Ruhollah Khomeini, *Jayegah-e Zan dar Andisheh-ye Imam Khomeini* (Tehran: Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Imam Khomeini, 2005), p. 42. The following quotes were cited and translated in Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, op. cit.

⁸²Ibid, p. 70.

⁸³Ibid, p. 43.

⁸⁴Ibid, pp. 53–54.

⁸⁵Ibid, p. 56.

⁸⁶Ibid, p. 165.

⁸⁷Ibid, p. 381.

⁸⁸Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, op. cit., p. 294.

⁸⁹Ibid, p. 294–295.

⁹⁰Ibid, p. 295.

⁹¹Ibid, p. 297.

women enjoyed the practical and concrete incentives for such activism (such as educational opportunities⁹² and subsidised housing) many were attracted to the intangible benefits, the sense of community, piety and purpose that came with embodying the ideal revolutionary Islamic woman.⁹³

In addition to broad-sweeping economic changes and a remarkably successful family planning programme, the new influx of Islamist women into the political and social scene had a profound influence on the demographics and social landscape of the country. Ironically, many of the Islamic policies that reintroduced traditional sexual mores resulted in the undoing of traditional family orders. By joining Islamist organisations, many women were able to build an autonomous life for themselves, free from the domineering conservatism of their families. However, a perhaps less tangible affect was that many women became remarkably politically conscious as a result of post-revolutionary discourse and policy. Not only did these women truly believe that the revolution would bring them justice, but they were determined to have that promise realised.

The vision of Islamic justice for women so ubiquitous in revolutionary discourse engendered a profound tension during the second decade of the Islamic Republic once this vision failed to materialise in the minds of many women. Some commentators argued that women's current hardship was due to leftover influences from the imperialist regime (pre-revolution) and encouraged patience. However, this argument became less and less palatable once it became clear that many women were suffering as a result of policies justified in the name of Islam.

For instance, during the early 1980s, women's magazines, including those sponsored by the government, published several stories of poor young women who had entered a state-sanctioned temporary marriage (*sigheh*) and became pregnant. After their marriages expired, they were unable to find their children's fathers and were thus forced into prostitution or drug peddling in order to feed their children. Other stories focused on women who were widowed after their husbands died in battle. Many of these women lost their children in addition to their husbands due to custody laws mandating that the paternal grandfather or uncle receive custody and guardianship of children whose father has died. These widows – who were in many ways the ideal Islamic revolutionary subject – spoke of having given their beloved husbands to the revolution and for Islam, only to be rewarded by having their children torn from their bosoms in the name of Islamic government. 'How can that be just and fair?', they asked. 'Is that what we were promised by Islamic justice?'⁹⁴

Convinced that the true spirit of Islam was justice and equality, Islamist women – many of whom were well educated in religious matters – began to point out that much of what was presented to women as Islamic was in fact 'patriarchy in

⁹²For a detailed discussion of education as a tool of Islamisation in post-revolutionary Iran, see G. Mehran, 'The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Comparative Education Review*, 47:3 (2003), pp. 269–286.

⁹³Some of these women received such a sense of self-fulfillment from this Islam-approved social activities that they were able to transform the structure of their own families and communities in order to redefine themselves as partners and citizens rather than subservient wives. For a discussion on the Volunteer Health Workers, one such programme, see H. Hoodfar, 'Activism under the Radar: Volunteer Health Workers in Iran', *Middle East Report* 250 (2009), pp. 56–58.

⁹⁴For more on how Islamic family policies conflicted with individual women's sense of justice, see Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran*, op. cit.; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Z. Mir-Hosseini, 'Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism', *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006).

Islamic costume'. They advocated for a new gender vision based on woman-centred interpretations of Islamic texts. A host of women's publications re-emerged in the 1990s, ranging from those that tacitly claimed broader rights for women (e.g. *Zan-i Ruz*, *Payam-i Zan*) to those that explicitly styled themselves as feminist (e.g. *Zanan*, *Jins-i Duvoom*). Many of these publications contributed to the task of developing new women-centred interpretations of Shi'i Islamic doctrines. Using the same language as state authorities and the clergy, these writers delegitimised some of the most sexist government policy and clerical opinion.⁹⁵ As a result of women's activism and advocacy, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree in December 1991 granting martyrs' widows' custody of their children even after remarriage. In addition, women were granted the opportunity to demand wages from their husbands for housework in December 1992, and various other amendments were made to the family code to the benefit of women's status.⁹⁶

Yet while women made important strides in the decades following the Revolution, none of their activity was free from controversy. In fact, even Khomeini's most ardent supporters – women like Azam Taleqani, Faizeh Hashemi, Marziyeh Dabbagh and Zahra Rahnavard – faced severe challenges in their attempts to secure gender justice in new state. For instance, the Women's Society of the Islamic Republic (WSIR), founded by Rahnavard, Dabbagh and Taleqani, was initially founded following the revolution in order to ensure an appropriate transition from the imperialist regime into the new political and social order that would end women's oppression. However, when the WSIR criticised some of the regime's policies of Islamisation and questioned some of their interpretations of Islamic doctrine, the group was shut down by the government and many of its members were met with open hostility from the hard-line Islamic Republican Party. This initial conflict exposed the deep contradiction in revolutionary rhetoric concerning the ideal female subjectivity: her participation was both necessary and unpalatable at the same time. Some hard-liners attempted to solve this problem by replacing the outspoken Islamist women on the *Zan-e Ruz* editorial board and party committees with their own supporters, but this too became unsustainable once these women, too, began to question government policies and hegemonic opinion.⁹⁷

The oppression of Islamist women's rights defenders – who call themselves 'Islamist feminists' – not only failed to quiet their activism, but also led to widespread disillusionment with the factions of the Islamic regime. In recent years, this frustration has inspired some religious women to join forces with secular lawyers and journalists such as Shirin Ebadi, Mehrangiz Kar and Shadi Sadr, who criticise gender discriminatory laws using human rights-based language. Of particular significance was *Zanan* ('Women'), an independent women's magazine respected and celebrated by Iranian women from various political and religious persuasions. Shahla Sherkat, *Zanan's* visionary managing director and ardent supporter of the Islamic Revolution, accepted contributions from a range of commentators, providing a common platform upon which women from various spheres and specialties, and both secular and religious viewpoints, could share and learn from one another. As a result, women

⁹⁵Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, op. cit.

⁹⁶For more discussion see Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran*, op. cit., M. Kar and H. Hoodfar, 'Personal Status Law as Defined by the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Appraisal', *WLUML Special Dossier* (1996), pp. 7–35; Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, op. cit., pp. 312–313.

⁹⁷Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran*, op. cit.

not only began using religious arguments to challenge the regime's patriarchal interpretation of family and penal law, but also began to mobilise an autonomous women's movement that became a leader in the overall reformist cause.⁹⁸ When *Zanan* was subsequently shut down by the government in 2008, the frustration was felt not only by secular women but by Islamist women as well. Recent women's rights initiatives such as the One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign and the 2009 Women's Election Coalition are direct results of this collaboration.

In sum, we can identify several 'unintended consequences' posed by the embodiment and enforcement of revolutionary Islamic womanhood. On one hand, women's allegiance to a totalitarian ideology that advocated women's subordination to men nonetheless allowed these women to gain a measure of autonomy, influence and even power over others.⁹⁹ On the other hand, the promise of gender justice led many to question hegemonic norms regarding sexual morality using the same Islamic principles and language that justified these norms in the first place. While doing so, these women were working to destabilise the image of the ideal Islamic subject that was fundamentally grounded in the sexual norms and practices they were questioning. As the ideal Islamic woman was radically destabilised, so was the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic itself, as many of its most ardent supporters formed the base of a 'reform' movement.

Concluding Thoughts

As this article has demonstrated, the ideal revolutionary Islamic woman was by no means passive. Her role was an active one, and she was required to participate in the public arena as a supporter of the new Islamic regime. For the post-revolutionary leadership, it was important to project a positive image of the Islamic Republic as a place that realised gender justice, where women were an integral part of society not only as the embodiment of indigenous cultural and religious values but also as active participants in public life.¹⁰⁰ It is important to note, however, that just because women's political participation was on some levels required by the state, it does not necessarily follow that this participation was empowering or beneficial for women. Widespread policies were implemented that forced women to leave their jobs, prevented them from running for public office and censured their opportunities for public speech and assembly. Indeed it was these policies that led many scholars to believe that Iranian women were being barred from public participation altogether. At the same time, confusion arises from the acknowledgment that many Iranian women today owe their jobs, their economic autonomy, and their sense of moral worth to the Islamisation of society.¹⁰¹ What I am suggesting here is that the ideal Islamic woman in post-revolutionary discourse challenges the notion that public visibility necessarily leads to empowerment, while activity in the home is necessarily apolitical. As we

⁹⁸H. Hoodfar and F. Sadeghi, 'Against All Odds: The Women's Movement in The Islamic Republic of Iran', *Development*, 52:2 (2009), pp. 215–223.

⁹⁹Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, op. cit., p. 257.

¹⁰⁰H. Esfandiari, 'The Majles and Women's Issues in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in Afkhami and Friedl, op. cit., p. 79.

¹⁰¹Z. Mir-Hosseini, 'Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran: Divorce, Veiling and Emerging Feminist Voices', in Haleh Afshar, *Women and Politics in the Third World* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 156.

have seen, by 'forcing women back in the home', Islamic authorities were, in an important if not counterintuitive way, necessitating their public participation by casting them in the political role of culturally authentic mother upholding the integrity of the nation. At the same time, some of the most subversive activities that Iranian women have done to challenge the regime have taken place not 'in the streets' but in their own homes.¹⁰² This forces us not only to reassess the role gender plays in totalitarian ideologies but also to critically reevaluate the 'repressed in the home/empowered in the public sphere' dichotomy that often pervades the literature about Iranian women and Muslim women in general.

In Iran, the formation of the revolutionary Islamic female subject led not only to the consolidation of the social norms that legitimised the Islamic Republic, but also to the destabilisation of these very same norms. This was a consequence of the inherent ambiguity of the Islamic woman's position. As Judith Butler observes, to the degree that social norms achieve stability through repeated enactment, agency is founded in the possibility that those iterations may fail or be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms. Thus the condition of possibility of each social formation is also 'the possibility of its undoing'.¹⁰³ Indeed, the subjectivity shaped by Islamisation policies engendered a fundamental tension: the revolutionary Islamic woman is both inside the home and out on the street; she is both autonomous and controlled; she is at once a delicate flower in need of protection, and yet potentially dangerous in her sexual manipulation of men; a loyal follower but a voice to be reckoned with. As such, the remarkable resistance that many contemporary Iranian women now demonstrate – a mighty women's movement, a nuanced feminist consciousness, a commanding voice for reform – is as much a product of Islamisation as it a challenge. By destabilising the subjectivity embodied by ideal revolutionary Islamic womanhood, Iranian women are not only constructing a new, unforeseen subjectivity, but destabilising the discursive foundations of the Islamic Republic itself.

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¹⁰²For a discussion on how women have carved out new and vital personal spaces within the family and public sphere, see Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008).

¹⁰³J. Butler, 'Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time', *Diacritics*, 27:1 (1997), pp. 13–15.