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REVOLUTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN 20TH CENTURY IRAN

by

Simintaj Bakhtiar

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Dissertation present to the University of Durham  
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## ABSTRACT

### REVOLUTIONARY AND POST-REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN IRAN

Saharsh Nakshian  
Ph.D. Dissertation

This work is an attempt to analyse the socio-political and cultural position of women's movements in twentieth century Iran with emphasis on the revolutionary events which have taken place in Iran this century and which have affected the position of women.

Discussed first is the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, which marked a turning point in the position of women as reforms created educational opportunities for women despite opposition from traditionalists. This period is here considered the beginning of feminist movements in Iran since independent women's organisations flourished around this time.

Chapters 2 and 3 present the Pahlavi era during which an increasingly authoritarian centralised state was formed and all women's activities were channelled into one centralised institution, Sazman-e Zananeh Iran. During this period, the White Revolution, a programme of socio-economic and political changes, was introduced and implemented. Its reforms, where affecting the position of women are also discussed here.

Chapter 4 analyses the ambiguity concerning the position of women in Islam and the re-interpretation of the Shi-ite ideology dominant in Iran. This ambiguity and the dual female image, is argued, has led to an inferior position for women.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the process of Islamisation and subsequent legal and cultural reforms regarding women. Various women's organisations were founded at this time but under severe repression, only the state-run Muslim Women's organisations survived.

Chapter 7 analyses the ideological position of progressive groups on the position of women's rights in Iran. The practice of this ideology by these groups and its effects on the development of women's movements is discussed here.

Finally the changing consciousness about women's position in the society, particularly in the context of the progressive groups critical of the Islamic Republic is discussed. The attention paid by all groups to the women's position at this time in history, is argued to work to the advantage of women in the future as it will create consciousness about the issue.

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## INTRODUCTION

Iranian women participated in vast numbers in the revolutionary movements of twentieth century Iran which led to the downfall of the monarchies in Iran and brought into power parliamentary and republican governments. Alongside their participation in the revolutionary movements, Iranian women have also fought consistently to obtain a better position within the Iranian society through their feminist activities.

The political movements of the Iranian women, however, like those of other middle Eastern women, have not been much visible to the Western observer until very recent years. Common belief has been that women of the Muslim world have never been involved in a social movement initiated and led by themselves. Perhaps the Islamic doctrine which contributes to the very controlled traditional upbringing of girls in an Islamic society, leading to the observance of the veil, lower level of education, and therefore legal and political inferiority of women in these societies, has been responsible for this outlook. For these reasons, there is very little or no mention of women's rights movements in the Muslim world. In the case of Iran too, scholarly attention has always been paid to historical, political and economic issues and not very much has been written about the women's rights movements in Iran. Whereas consciousness about the position and the rights of Iranian women has been expressed by women themselves as early as the nineteenth century. These feminist women, although small in numbers, and in spite of severe opposition to their cause, questioned the inferior position of women and had to face great hardship.

In the twentieth century, the changes in social and economic conditions in the Third World and Iran have resulted in the consciousness of women about their position and their rights. A crucial and basic change in the conditions of political struggle has been the struggle of

society as a whole against foreign domination, whether direct colonisation or indirect rule. The formation of this struggle within the society marks a new era of the struggle and this had influenced the position of women a great deal.

Women's movements in other countries and at international level during the 1960s and 1970s affected Iranian women in that they realised women could fight for their rights and obtain some of them. The influence of European suffragette movements on women in Iran at the turn of the century was similar except that the communication system has improved much more and this is a very important factor in various women's groups getting information about each other's activities, experiences and achievements.

Concepts such as double oppression and the necessity of organising women and other feminist concepts which had started with the movements of women in Europe and the United States were gradually taken and understood by Iranian women who had experienced these movements and had seen the formation of organisations for women and their activities. Most Iranian women who had seen these changes in the position of women abroad were students who, upon returning to Iran, tried to somehow use their information and experience in forming independent women's groups.

Since the nineteenth century, Iran has been caught in a conflict between traditionalism, which has meant leaning towards Islamic socio-cultural practices as a means of protecting national and cultural interest on the one hand, and modernisation, as was necessitated by increasing integration of Iran into the world economy and that inevitably meant experiencing a process of Westernisation. This, in itself, has always created a major tension between traditionalism and Western style modernism with the position of women right at the centre of the conflict.

Twentieth century Iran saw various stages of this tension. Because of its dictatorial political system and the influence of foreign powers, Iran has been increasingly imitating the West in its process of modernisation and need for change. As such, it experienced continuous societal tensions. These tensions and the conflict are best shown in the question of women's rights raised in the twentieth century, starting from the Constitutional Revolution, changing momentum at various stages during the Pahlavi reign and the White Revolution, and finally at its height, during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when large numbers of women participated in demonstrations, intentionally adopting the chador in a symbolic gesture of rejecting the Western values.

With the climax of the anti-Shah movement, which resulted in the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, new issues and views about the status of women in Iran came to the forefront once more. The establishment of the Islamic Republic brought with it a drastic legal and social change in the position of women which particularly affected urban women. The day by day changes and evolution of the discussions on the status of women within Islam and the Islamic Republic, in particular the legal changes, the partial success and subsequent failure of women, meant a continuous re-evaluation of the events in the face of sudden, sometimes unpredicted changes. This very often confused the process of analysing events.

In the light of studying the women's rights movements under such circumstances, several problems occurred. A major problem here has been the scarcity of resources. Very little research that has been done on the subject of Iranian women has, basically, been the work of historians or travellers. Usually women and their activities were mentioned as part of a different subject such as historical or cultural studies rather than a serious analytical work specifically done on women, especially on the

position of contemporary Iranian women. Although we know that, at least at the beginning of the twentieth century in Iran, there were a number of women activists, primary sources on their status, activities and publications are not easily accessible for researchers as they were either destroyed or kept in their family libraries. The very little work that was done during the Pahlavi era on the subject of women inside Iran, have inevitably been propaganda and biased in favour of the ruling regime. Therefore, with the exception of very recent work done by feminists abroad since the Islamic Revolution, there is little objective and analytical work on Iranian women. The situation is improving as more and more conscious women are writing about themselves and their experiences.

The onset of the revolution itself made the possibility of any research inside Iran very difficult. With no possibility of field work in Iran, a major part of the information came to me through informal interviews conducted abroad, basically among the students and self-exiled women of the middle classes, either affiliated to various political groups or independent in Europe and the United States of America. These interviews were most interesting in that they represented the diversity of views on the women's position in Iran whether under the Pahlavis or the Islamic Republic.

A major problem here however, as most interviews revealed, was that immediately after the revolution, most views were biased against the Pahlavi regime's impact on the position of women, to the point that any positive attempt or achievement for women during that period was overlooked. Depending on which political ideology they followed, women's perceptions differed. A great number of women, while dismissing the Shah's reforms on the position of women, had high hopes that in a democratic atmosphere the position of women would improve and genuine

women's organisations would flourish. It was most interesting that those same women, interviewed a few years later on the same subject, had developed a more objective view and when comparing the status of women under the two regimes, now showed bias against the Islamic Republic's treatment of women.

This change of view was not just among the Iranian women abroad but also prevailed among other Iranians, in particular those affiliated to the leftist or religious groups. A period of over five years, from 1981 when anti-government groups abroad were very active, shows a pattern of shifting to more moderate views and supporting moderate groups. Women's organisations abroad also flourished at the beginning of this period but gradually, as the political atmosphere changed, most of these groups dissolved amidst disillusionment, confusion and loss of hope. In addition, most members of these groups were students who either graduated and became professionals or formed families and as exiles living in a different culture and economy, their priorities shifted. The various women's groups that continued to be active, however, have been influential in keeping the issue alive and continuously engage in activities that raise consciousness within their immediate environment. They have also engaged in research and publications on the subject of Iranian women and this is extremely important for the future of any serious development in the position of women.

This work is an attempt to analyse the socio-political and cultural position of women's rights movements in twentieth century Iran with the emphasis on the revolutionary events which took place in Iran and affected women's position during this century. The socio-political atmosphere in which women's rights movements flourished or were hindered will be analysed where relevant to women and the characteristics of various women's organisations and their activities since the beginning of

the twentieth century will be discussed. The role the ruling government, geared to modernise, and religious and cultural forces guarding tradition, have played in success or lack of success of women's movements will be discussed. The position of women after the Constitutional Revolution, during the Pahlavi reign and the Islamic Republic, will be discussed in chronological order. These analyses will concentrate on urban women as most feminist women's activities and organisations have been conducted in the cities and among urban women. Also the cities have been major centres of change and revolutionary upheavals.

Chapter 1 evaluates the position of women at the beginning of the twentieth century and discusses how the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 marked a turning point in the position of women and how reforms from above created the opportunities for urban women to enter the labour force and educational institutions, despite opposition from religious and traditional groups. This period is also the beginning of the feminist movements in Iran. Individual women, conscious of the changing position of women abroad, started women's organisations and societies with activities geared towards the women's cause. This, together with socio-political changes of the period, helped to change the image of women among the literate and upper classes.

In Chapters 2 and 3 the position of women under the Pahlavi regime is discussed. Reza Shah's era concentrates on the formation of a centralised state and Mohammad Reza Shah's reign on the socio-economic development of the state. It is in the light of these developments that the position of women is viewed in this period. It will be discussed that in this process women's movements and activities also are centralised and controlled by the state. The formation of Women's Organisation of Iran and the reforms of the White Revolution regarding women will be discussed here.

Chapter 4 analyses the ambiguity concerning the position of women by looking at the contradictory position of women in Islam and in the reinterpretation of the Shi'ite ideology dominant in Iran. It is argued here that this ambiguity and duality of the female image has led to the inferior position and manipulation of women.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the events immediately following the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran. The socio-political atmosphere in which the process of Islamisation and subsequent legal and cultural reforms regarding the position of women took place, will be analysed. The formation and activities of various women's groups during this period will also be analysed.

Chapter 7 analyses the ideological position of the leftist groups on the position of women's rights in Iran, how this has been practised by these groups and its effects on the development of women's organisations.

Finally, the nature of the Islamic Republic and the future influence on the formation of women's organisations is evaluated. The argument here would be that the basis of Islamic law which regulates all details of social and private behaviour at all levels for all members of society, is in major conflict with any meaning of women's emancipation and women's movements as in the case of the latter, a woman becomes the decision-maker for her own life and this shows itself at all levels.

This conflict has drawn all attention to the question of women. For example, the issue of the veil and the position of women is continuously under debate. This attention to the woman's position in society would, in the long run, be to the advantage of women as it will create consciousness about the issue. This has caused a reflection on the issue by the more progressive and leftist groups and a departure from their previous discussions and arguments. Women have become aware that if they

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themselves do not solve their problems, the left will not be able to do it for them.

The lower class Iranian woman feels that she has gained power and through this Islamic ideology a new arena has been created where this woman directly participates in social and political events, for example in the reconstruction war, Jahade Sazandeghi and demonstrations. Although participation of women in social and political activities is in total accord with socialism, this has created a practical dependence on the regime and this creates a huge obstacle in the way of Iranian feminists. Until such time that women's demands have been voiced at the level of society, this would be a political issue. Whatever way the independent women's organisation forms and develops in the future, whatever its structure, and whatever activities it engages in, the women's movement in the future will have great influence in the formation of the future government in Iran and if the new government does not pay attention to the women's question, it will be in total conflict again with women's demands.

Women's struggles and women's movements have started, flourished and experienced various constructions and reconstructions in the last eighty years in Iran, in other words it has set up a tradition for the middle class woman. Under severe repression, at least there are women's groups that have formed abroad and this is important. As long as the issue stays alive, in spite of the apparent silence and confusion of the middle class Iranian woman, there is hope for improvement.

## Chapter 1

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### Traditional Situation, Constitutional Revolution and Transformation

The participation of women in revolutionary Iran is not limited to the events of the late 1970s. The question of women's position and their emancipation was first raised as part of the nationalist reaction to both foreign domination and corruption of the ruling Qajar dynasty. Women's involvement in political activities had started with their participation in the events of the Tobacco Movement of 1891-1892, and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. By then, Iranian women had gone through a period of transformation which marked a turning point in their lives.

#### TRADITIONAL SITUATION

##### Traditional status of women

Prior to this period of transformation, urban women's lives were very restricted. A woman's chastity and virtue were directly related to the honour of her family and its head, therefore women had to be kept confined to the protected home environment and guarded by male members of their family lest the honour of the family was lost.

This concept served to divide social space into male and female. Female space consisted of the domestic sphere of the household which was the woman's domain and she did not leave it except to go on pilgrimage or to the public baths. On such occasions of entering the public, the domain of the male, she would wear the veil and be accompanied by a male member of the family. The veil here is analogous to the four walls of the house that protected the female. Therefore women, even within the public sphere, would still have their own private sphere and were not allowed to trespass the masculine domain. The veil thus served not just

as a woman's protection, it prevented her as well from trespassing on the masculine domain.

In addition to social restraints, educational institutions and opportunities were also very limited for women. Very few of the upper class women had access to private tutors and could read or write. The general belief was that literate women would pose a danger against society. Thus even most women who could read or write, would hide it from their husbands.

Women's legal situation was no better. Child marriages and polygamy were accepted norms with the husband having total control over divorce by repudiating the wife and having the custody of children. Women had no right to vote or to occupy a political position.

The inferior position of women was not questioned much by the majority of women. Strong religious beliefs and strict, submissive upbringing of girls together with their belief in fate would lead them to internalize and accept their inferior conditions as what was the fate of women, without resentment or any hope for a better position.

#### Pre-Islamic Status

In spite of the belief that the inferior position of women in Iran is caused by Islam, historical evidence shows that women's position in pre-Islamic Iran, when dominant religion was Zoroastrianism, was also inferior. This inferiority was caused by other economic, social and political factors.

The position of women under the Sassanian Empire (208-651 A.D.), prior to the Arab invasion of Iran, was an inferior and servile one. Two queens, Furandokht and Azarmidokht, of this dynasty ruled for a very short period of time over Iran. This has led to the belief that women of the period enjoyed full political and social rights equal to those of men. Nevertheless, the reign of these women does not necessarily prove

the recognition of women's rights during Sassanian rule. Girshman<sup>1</sup> explains how it was the absence of more qualified leaders that led to these women acquiring the ruling position.

The social rules and religious teachings of Zoroastrian Iran demanded total obedience of a woman to her husband. Women who were disobedient to their husband or who refused the sexual demands of their husbands, were threatened with eternally "licking a hot oven with their tongues, and having their hands perpetually under an oven in hell."<sup>2</sup>

Women were said to lack wisdom. Men were advised not to trust them and not to tell them their secrets. Marriage and divorce laws were designed to suit men's convenience; men could marry as many wives as they wished and many wealthy upper class men had harims where their women would spend their entire lives, whereas women could only marry one man.<sup>3</sup> A divorced woman was not allowed to re-marry while her first husband was still alive and the right to divorce was limited to men.<sup>4</sup> Also upper class women were veiled and secluded to be protected from contact with common men.<sup>5</sup>

The upbringing and education of women took place entirely inside the house. A woman was raised as a docile and submissive servant of the men of the house. She had to be submissive to her father and brothers, and later, when she married, to her husband and her mother-in-law. In other words, she was never an independent individual.

Relative independence would come to her only through maturity. As she became older in later stages of her life, she would be able to control her children and thus enjoy relative power, especially if she had a son. She would then control his choice of bride and would have authority over her daughter-in-law particularly with regard to housekeeping and child rearing.

These attitudes about women's inferiority to men were very much

established in Sassanian society. They survived through the Sassanian downfall and were adopted by the Muslim conquerors. They could not easily be changed by the early liberal teachings and practices of Islam and the pre-Islamic Arab society. In fact, Iran had many conquerors and rulers, among them the Romans, the Greeks, the Turks, the Arabs and the Mongols, each one of which left its social impact on the Iranian society but none of which enhanced the position of Iranian women. The longest invasion of Iran was by the Arabs in the seventh century which lasted two hundred years and resulted in the adoption of Islam and Islamic values. The position of women under Islam has been discussed later.<sup>6</sup> It was only in the nineteenth century, when socio-economic conditions began to change, that women's status and their role in society started its transformation.

#### The Western Influence

During the Qajar period (1784-1925) as the result of a series of Iranian military defeats, the interaction of Iran and the West increased and Iranians were exposed to European life style and culture. Many members of the upper class families saw the solution to Iran's problems in emulating the West. Western military techniques were adopted and modern schools teaching European languages were opened.<sup>7</sup>

Although these changes were gradual and narrow in scope, they eventually brought about changes in the life style and attitudes of the upper class families who were affected by them. One important change during the late nineteenth century was in the attitude towards women. Women became more visible. They began to be mentioned in the literature of those new writers who had come under Western influence. An increasing number of men made efforts to see that their daughters were taught to read and write at home as there were no public schools for them. Most of these girls became pioneers for the modern education of women. Also the contact of upper class women with the wives and families of European

diplomats in Iran was very influential in their learning about European life-styles.

One point should be considered in analysing the conditions of Iranian women and that is the fact that the life-style of the urban, rural, and tribal women differed enormously and was determined by social class as well as ecological conditions. The seclusion and veiling of women were much greater in urban areas than in the rural or tribal areas. However, social differences within the urban area also influenced the seclusion and veiling of women. For example an upper class woman was under more pressure to observe veiling and staying within the private areas of the house. The focus of this research is on the life-style of urban women, thus only the urban situation will be discussed.

#### Elite Urban Women

In the cities, among the upper classes, formal education of women was more common but with early marriage, a woman's education usually ended. There was no need for further education as a woman's life was concentrated on running the affairs of the house and in finding ways to satisfy her husband. The central focus of a woman's life was to get married. A mother, from her daughter's birth, would start preparing for her marriage and would teach her how to be obedient to her husband. A woman's basic duty was to please her husband, no matter what her social class was. Mothers warned their daughters that if they did not please their husbands, they would face the danger of being divorced or having a havoo, a rival wife, both of which were great disasters in a woman's life.

The life of most women in the harim of the Shah had similarities to that of other upper class women. Seclusion and ignorance were the chief characteristics of this life. They all lived in the inner house, andarouni, of the palace and were watched by eunuchs. They had large

numbers of servants and slaves to take care of their daily needs. Their children were fed by wet nurses and brought up by nannies and tutors. Their major duty was to attract and please the king. To do so, they would sometimes resort to witchcraft. But most of their time was spent in idleness; they ate, slept and were dominated by interpersonal rivalries and jealousies.

#### Prominent Women of this Period

In spite of such conditions, there existed, in the harim of the Shah, educated, capable and influential women. Among the more famous ones are Mahde Olya and Anisoldoleh. Some of these women used their privileged positions to learn more and to increase their knowledge. Some became accomplished writers, for example, Fakhroldowle was a poet and is credited with transcribing the popular romance of Amir Arsalan. Also Tajolsaltane who wrote her memoirs criticising the conditions of Iranian society and particularly the position of women within this society.<sup>9</sup>

The most prominent woman of this period was Qhorratol'ain (1814-1852), born to a middle class religious family in Qhazvin. She received her early education from her father at home and took courses in theology from her relatives. She became an expert in religious matters and would participate in various theological discussions and teaching. She married her cousin and had three children but she was cast out when she later joined the Babi movement and became a Bahai.

Bahaism called for radical religious and social changes. It strongly advocated a better position for women. Perhaps this accounted for Qhorratol'ain's attraction to Bahaism. She used it to free herself from the boundaries that surrounded her in the name of Islam. She strongly adhered to Bahaism, refused to wear the veil, and appeared without it in front of a mixed audience to give a lecture. This was the first evidence of a woman appearing in public without the veil. She was

prosecuted both as a Bahai and as a woman for refusing to wear the veil. In 1852, she attempted unsuccessfully to kill Nasser al-Din Shah but was arrested and executed.

In spite of the efforts of Qhorratol'ein and other individual women to improve the position of women during the Qajar period, women continued to live segregated and subordinated lives. The separation of the sexes was reinforced by the veiling of women and by the structuring of domestic space within the house, divided into men's and women's quarters. Thus the location of urban women and their physical movement was contained and constrained by both veils and walls.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century however, Western influence on the social position of women became more noticeable with increasing numbers of women being affected by Western culture. The memoirs of Tajol Saltaneh, daughter of Nasser al-Din Shah, reveal not only the changes that were then taking place, but the transformation of consciousness among women. She herself is an example of these changes and the arousal of consciousness which was the partial result.

Tajol Saltaneh was born in 1884 (1263 A.H.). Her education included studying the French language and contemporary European literature. She had not visited Europe but she admired and idealised the European life-style and strongly wished that Iranian women could have the same rights as European women whom she believed were able to defend their rights.<sup>9</sup> Her writings reveal the beginning of the Iranian woman's perception of her own life and her awareness of the life of women outside of the harim both in Iran and in Europe. She praises working and peasant women and appears to have been influenced by socialist ideas. She blamed the backwardness of the country on the negligence of the upper class and ruling men who sold the country's resources to foreigners. She specifically claimed that if women had power, they would not allow this,



and that they would develop internal trade and improve agriculture.<sup>49</sup> Tajol Sadtaneh, herself the daughter of the ruler, makes the beginnings of a social analysis, exposing what later is described as a patriarchal structure of domination and provides a brief "class" analysis.

Both Qhorratol'ein and Tajol Saltaneh's ideas and activities have been used in raising contemporary Iranian women's consciousness. Qhorratol'ein in particular has been somewhat used as a "role model".

## THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

### The Emergence of National Consciousness

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Iran had become an area of conflict between Russia and Britain and the Qajar Shahs (1794-1925) were constantly involved in dealing with these countries. In addition, the wave of modernization and westernization which had affected Islamic countries in the nineteenth century, leading to internal reforms, had also started to affect Iranian society.

During the rule of Nasser al-Din Shah (1848-1896), particularly under the influence of his Prime Minister, Amir Kabir, who in turn had been influenced by the changes in Turkey, there were several attempts towards introducing liberal reforms and some degree of modernization. The first newspaper in Persian was established in this period and the first Polytechnic College, Darolfonoun, was opened in Tehran. Roads and communication systems were also improved. In spite of such progress, Amir Kabir was executed by the Shah's order because he was becoming too powerful and Nasser al-Din Shah reverted to absolute dictatorial rule.

By the end of his rule, however, agitation for reforms had increased and became a serious problem for his successor Mozaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907). However, the feudalistic structure of society and despotic rule was maintained. Parts of the country were bartered away to foreign interests through shameful agreements with the Russians and the British.

The nationalist and resistance movements which had started in the nineteenth century were opposed to the Iranian monarch's absolutist power and to their acting in favour of Tsarist Russia and Imperialist Britain.

Iran's economy was reduced to semi-colonial situation with Iran forced to grant concessions to foreign entrepreneurs against its own economic interest. Robinson mentions that between 1885 and 1900, fifteen different countries had concessions from Iran and that the effect of foreign competition in Iran was greatly intensified by these concessions granted to foreigners because of their political predominance while in turn, the economic under-development of the country made it politically helpless in relation to the West.<sup>11</sup>

#### Tobacco Movement 1891-92

The crisis known as the Tobacco Movement in Iran started with the granting of a fifty year full monopoly of the tobacco industry by Nasser al-Din Shah, to a British company.<sup>12</sup> This was faced with many anti-government protests and marked the beginning of the alliance between the clergy and the intellectuals in an active move against the government. Secret societies in Iran began to be formed around this time.<sup>13</sup>

#### The Alliance between Religious Leaders and Intellectuals

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as a result of economic activities such as importing foreign goods and exporting domestic products and investment in industry and mining, an Iranian bourgeoisie began to emerge. Sections of this new class saw its interests in conflict with the foreign capitalists in the home market as well as with the feudal interests that ruled the country. It was these sections of the bourgeoisie who were found among the Constitutionalists together with the clergy and the urban intellectuals demanding democratic rights in 1906.

The economic crisis at the turn of the century led to various

strikes and demonstrations with demands all ignored by the government. Eventually protesters demanded restraints on the absolute power of the Monarch through a written constitution.

The new national consciousness had created a common interest among different classes of society and resulted in the unlikely alliance of both conservative religious and modernist secular leaders. Intellectuals had tried unsuccessfully to persuade the Qajar Court to agree to reforms towards modernization. They then allied themselves with anti-government religious leaders in the hope of bringing about the desired changes. Using religious sentiments, and being respected by the masses, the clergy politicized and mobilized the masses against foreign domination. Stressing Islamic values, they could communicate with the illiterate, but religious, masses.

This alliance was supported by other groups in particular the traditional merchants in the bazaar who provided the bulk of economic support for the movement. The market place being the centre not only for religious activities but economic activities as well, these merchants enjoyed tremendous influence and thus were a great force in mobilizing the masses and paralysing the economy, forcing the Shah to give in to people's demands.

Similar to the events of 1978, religious societies were formed in the cities to recruit and educate people with new revolutionary and anti-imperialist ideas. Mosques were used as gathering points for the expansion of a new ideology of protest against the corruption of the Qajar Court and the need for a change for a better future for the country. These gatherings led to demonstrations and culminated in the Constitutional Revolution and the eventual overthrow of the Qajar dynasty.

### The Downfall of the Qajar Dynasty

Mozzafar al-Din Shah had many of the leaders of the Constitutional Movement arrested but, unable to stop the popular protests, he gave in to some of their demands including the demand for the establishment of a national assembly, Majlis. The first Majlis drafted the Constitution in 1906.

Mozzafar al-Din Shah died five days after the establishment of the first Majlis and his son Mahammad Ali succeeded. He was opposed to the Constitution and attempted to subvert it. In his efforts to turn back the reforms, he attacked the Majlis. This led to an armed struggle between the Shah, supported by the Russian forces, and the Nationalists supported by the mass of the people. The Nationalists recaptured Tehran and the Shah was replaced by his son, Ahmad. The Russians, however, invaded Iran in 1911 and gave an ultimatum to the Constitutionalists who had to give in to the Russian domination in the north. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Soviet government renounced all Tsarist claims on Iran.

In 1921 Reza Khan of the Iranian Cossack Brigade rebelled against the Russian commander and led a successful march to Tehran. He then reorganised the armed forces, suppressed tribal revolts and crushed the Soviet Republic of Gilan formed by Mirza Kourcheck Khan. He subsequently became Prime Minister and established his rule over the country.

### Birth of Women's Consciousness

The beginning of the twentieth century thus saw the beginning of a national consciousness in Iran as a whole and marked a new era for Iranian women in particular. The Tobacco Movement of 1891 was a move by Iranian people against British Imperialism. The participation of women and the role they played in this particular movement, considering their inferior and restricted social and political position is of great

importance. Especially influential in this movement were women of upper class harims and the wives of the Shah. They boycotted the smoking of tobacco in the harims and broke their pipes, thus joining men in their fight against the British monopoly.

The faint voice of Iranian women first began to be heard at the time of the Constitutional Revolution when women actively demonstrated and cooperated with men in support of the Constitution.

The role women played in both the Tobacco Movement and the Constitutional Revolution was basically one of moral support and encouragement of men in their demands. However, despite the traditional and social values militating against them, women had gradually become politicised and active and a revolutionary mood was created among them. The desire for change existed only amongst a minority of women yet this minority was growing and becoming more and more self aware and politically conscious.

During the period following the Constitutional Revolution, there was a significant increase in the number of vocal women. Upper class women who had the chance for some education became the pioneers who perhaps formed the earlier models for women. It was through the efforts of these pioneering individual women that the question of equality for the female sex was first raised. These women asked to be given the opportunity to show their abilities and later on to use the opportunities when given to them by the Pahlavi rulers.<sup>14</sup> Women, as always, had to fight for their rights and individual women became models for inspiration and encouragement.

This small but dedicated group of women very actively helped the Constitutionalist in the civil war which broke out immediately after the ratification of the Constitution and the death of Mozaffar al-Din Shah. These women, under their veils, carried arms and messages between various

revolutionary groups in hiding.<sup>45</sup> While the number of these women remained small, they formed and established secret societies to enlighten more women and to recruit their support for the Constitution. Women, through their participation in the successful Constitutional movement, had discovered a truth about themselves; that they were the other half of the nation. A half that could be enormously powerful in the progress of the country.

#### The Beginning of Women's Rights Movement

It is very difficult to determine when the Women's Rights Movement started in Iran. Lack of reliable data and scarcity of studies on this subject, particularly as the movement was very short-lived, makes it difficult to theorise about the origins of the movement. Considering the confinement and seclusion of Iranian women to the domestic sphere, an external national event, the Constitutional Revolution, would have to be considered the time around which women's activities outside their home, at national level and for their own rights, originated and developed.

A few years prior to the Constitutional Revolution, at the beginning of the twentieth century, women's participation in the riots were inspired and supported by religious leaders. This made it possible for them to march into the streets with men and shout slogans. This behaviour was unprecedented and would have been unacceptable at the time, had it not been approved by the clergy.

Eventually, in particular after the Revolution in 1906, women formed their own societies, Anjomans, and gatherings, dowrehs. These were more informal groups with more of a personal relationship existing among the members. These gatherings and developing networks of information and communication made women aware of the activities outside the domestic sphere and of their own ability to participate in them and assume responsibility.

These secret societies and gatherings could be seen as the origins of the early women's rights movements in Iran. Two women's societies, Anjomane Azadi-ye Zanān, the Society for Women's Liberation and Anjomane Mokhadarat-e Vatān, the National Ladies' Society, were founded during this period. They are considered to be the first political women's group formally founded in Iran.

#### Activities of Women's Groups

Women organised many political activities in support of the Constitution and against foreign domination through their secret societies. It is recorded that in Tehran a woman shot and killed a royalist clergyman preaching to a large crowd against the Constitution, with a gun hidden under her veil.<sup>16</sup> This woman was probably a member of one of these societies.

The "veiled women" had played an important role in the success of the movements of this period. In spite of lack of detailed information about their activities in the armed struggle, there is evidence that shows their participation. For example, there is a photograph of sixty veiled women holding guns in their hands as a souvenir of those days and on one of the battlefields, among the dead bodies of the Constitutionalist, the bodies of twenty women in men's clothing were discovered.<sup>17</sup>

The height of the activities of these women's groups occurred in 1911 when the Russian government threatened the newly established Iranian Parliament, the Majlis, with the invasion of Iran if its demands were rejected. The demands of the Russian government were against the interests and integrity of Iran but the young Parliament was not strong enough to turn down these demands.

The day the Russian ultimatum was due to be discussed in the Majlis, the National Ladies' Society called for a public meeting outside the

Parliament building. A great number of women responded to this call and gathered there. A poem was recited by a woman reprimanding men for being "unworthy", stating that death was better than a shameful life and demanding men and women not to fear Russia but to fight like "lions" and "heroes" against them.<sup>19</sup> The recitation of this poem excited the crowd who started to chant slogans. Several women with pistols hidden under their veils, chadors, marched into the Parliament building and threatened to shoot the deputies as well as themselves and their families if the deputies gave in to the Russians. Morgan Shuster describes the event as follows:

Out from their courtyards and harems marched three hundred of that weak sex ... clad in their plain black robes with the white nets of their veils dropped over their faces. Many held pistols under their skirts or in the folds of their sleeves.. Straight to the Medjlis they went, and, gathered there, demanded of the president that he admit them all ... The president consented to receive a delegation of them. In his reception hall they confronted him, and lest he and his colleagues should doubt their meaning, these cloistered Persian mothers, wives and daughters exhibited threateningly their revolvers, tore aside their veils, and confessed their decision to kill their own husbands and sons, and leave behind their own dead bodies, if the deputies wavered in their duty to uphold the liberty and dignity of the Persian people and nation.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these women's efforts however, the Parliament had no other choice but to give in to the Russians due to the economic and political crisis facing Iran.

Nationalistic efforts of women further extended into non-violent actions. For example, during the civil war following the Revolution, a Committee of Persian Women had telegraphed the Queen of England asking for help in restoration of order in Iran.<sup>20</sup> When the Iranian National Bank was being established by the Iranian government, great numbers of women members of different women's groups sold their jewellery to buy bonds from the government.<sup>21</sup> Women also boycotted foreign goods in their efforts to support home products and promote home economy. They corresponded with the Russian delegation, blaming the political turmoil



created by the imperialistic powers for their own conditions and inferior status.<sup>222</sup> In 1911, groups of Iranian women had written to the British suffragettes asking them to try and influence the British government in its policies in Iran.<sup>223</sup>

The involvement of women in the Constitutional Revolution and their activities against foreign domination was at first with the encouragement and approval of the religious leaders. After the establishment of the Constitution in 1906 however, women formed their own organizations and worked independently. They were part of the general nationalistic movement which was aimed at Iranian independence from foreign influence and enforcement of the Constitution. It was nationalism that forced women out of their home to participate in a public event. Their goal was not in contradiction but the same as the religious leaders, the intellectuals and the merchants. To ask for any rights for women would not have been accepted.

It is stated that on one occasion during the Constitutional struggles, a few women took off their veils and, marching in the bazaar, shouted slogans like "Long live the Constitution ... long live freedom ... The Constitution has given us freedom and we want to be free from religious boundaries and live as we please."<sup>224</sup> These women were regarded as prostitutes and anti-Constitutionalist. This shows the general attitude of people towards the newly started women's rights movement. Veiled women who participated in the patriotic demonstrations enjoyed the total support of all nationalist groups, whereas unveiled women demanding their rights could not be tolerated by any group and their action was considered shameful.

The relationship between the nationalistic movements around the Constitutional Revolution and the women's rights movement was that as there was no historical or social evidence of organized women's action

inspired by themselves, it was the nationalistic feeling that inspired them into action. The desire for women's rights was expressed by a minority of constitutionalist women and not by all women participating in support of the Constitution. Women who supported and participated actively in the development of the women's movement were either participants in the nationalistic movements at the beginning of the century or came from families of intellectual or religious nationalists.

These educated women believed in a democratic system and advocated secularism and modernism as important factors for the future. They were conscious of the inferior position of Iranian women and advocated major reforms to improve the position of women. The development of the women's movement in Iran, at its early stages, benefited from the support of those men and women supporters of democracy and independence for Iran who, at the same time, emphasised the importance of women's rights. However, although the events of the Constitutional Revolution expanded women's activities into the non-domestic sphere, only literate women pursued the women's movement in Iran. Great masses of women who had joined the Revolutionary movement, returned to their traditional role.

#### Women's Rights and the Constitution of 1906

The outcome of the revolution was inevitably very disappointing for women. The Constitution established some of the rights of the people of Iran but remained indifferent towards the rights of women. The question of women was never taken seriously because the promotion of the position of women was not among the aims of the Constitution.

The major focus of the Constitutional Revolution was to restrict the absolute power of the Shah by establishing a Constitution. The Constitution was a mixture of parts of the French and Belgian Constitutions and Islamic religious declarations. Different articles and sections of the Constitution demonstrate the dominance of religion in it.

According to Article 2 of the Constitution, for example, any legislation which is considered contrary to the Sharia, Islamic laws, could not pass the parliament. It also stated that a board of five Shi'a clergy should always be present during any legislative session to review the proposed legislation to make sure that it did not contradict Islamic laws. As Banani has pointed out, the Constitution of 1906 was an attempt to establish "a Western liberal democracy with secular institutions but without the basic prerequisite of such a system: the separation of church and state."<sup>25</sup>

In the Constitution of 1906 women were not recognized as citizens equal to men and the election law considered women in the same category as the insane and the criminal, none of whom were allowed to vote.<sup>26</sup> Other laws concerned with marriage and divorce also deprived women of their individual rights as human beings and as mothers. Any attempt by women to claim individual freedom was seen as a counter-revolutionary act. The social, religious, and political climate of the time made any radical change in the social and legal position of women impossible.

In spite of the indifference of the Constitution towards women's rights, many constitutionalist and intellectual men supported the efforts of women for equality and rights. These men believed that improvement in the position of women was essential for a positive social and economic change. Some members of the Majlis also supported a better position for women but their support was neither significant nor successful. The prevailing view of the conservative religious leaders who dominated the Majlis was that the question of women should not be discussed in the Majlis. On one occasion, Vakil-o Roaya, a member of the Majlis, asked the clergy members for the reason why women were deprived of the right to vote and Sheikh Assadollah, one of the clergy members of the Majlis replied:

We must not discuss this question, for it is contrary to the etiquette of an Islamic Parliament. But the reason for excluding women is that God has not given them the capacity needed for taking part in politics and electing the representatives of the nation. They are the weaker sex, and have not the same powers of judgement as men have. However, their rights must not be trampled upon, but must be safeguarded by men as ordained in the Koran by God Almighty.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the economic and political crisis of the time which served as a hindrance to the development of the women's rights movement in Iran, under such prevailing attitude, any progress for women would seem unrealistic and impossible. However, those women who had developed a new consciousness through participating in the revolution, the women who had attacked the Majlis with guns and who had defended the rights of their country against foreign domination, could no longer be satisfied with stagnating in their houses. These women had come to the conclusion that they had to fight the ignorance that caused such injustice to them.

The efforts and activities of these conscious women had created an awareness among a small but growing number of families who felt the need to educate their daughters. Moreover, the literature published by writers and intellectuals of the time criticised the prevailing attitudes towards women and encouraged women's education.

## TRANSFORMATION

### Women activists and their activities

Women's activities then were geared towards enlightening more women. The first step was to open schools for women so that the younger generation of women would benefit. Until that time, the only schools for girls were those founded by American missionaries in 1835 in Rezaieh and in 1875 in Tehran. No Muslim girls were allowed to attend these schools. The first school for Muslim girls, called Namous, was opened in Tehran by Touba Azmoudeh. Soon after that, another school for girls, called Effatieh, was opened by Safiyeh Yasdi.

Mrs. Amidol Saltaneh founded a society for women with three major aims:

- 1) Encouragement of consumer goods made in Iran.
- 2) Improving the fine arts industry of girls and students.
- 3) Obtaining education, knowledge and art.<sup>289</sup>

The newspaper Shokoufeh, "Blossom", expanded and encouraged the aims of this society.

These constitutionalist women were Muslims and carefully provided a great emphasis on formal religious teachings in these early schools. However, they were harassed and threatened by religious leaders who denounced them, encouraging the public to attack the teachers and students and to destroy the school buildings because they believed that these schools were turning Muslim girls into unbelievers.

In spite of the religious leaders' continued hostility to girls' schools, more schools were founded. Their founders were also continuously subject to harassment and persecution, even though some of these founders came from religious backgrounds themselves. It was through the efforts of the active women of this period that the idea of modern education for women was gradually accepted and by 1918, the first public school for girls was opened in Tehran with the earlier private schools incorporated into the Ministry of Education.

Among the most prominent women activists of this period is Sedigheh Dowlat-Abadi. She was born into a prominent religious family in Esfahan. Her attempts to improve the conditions of women started very early. She managed to free herself from an arranged marriage by her family when she was sixteen so she could devote all her time to her cause.

In 1917, Sedigheh Dowlat-Abadi founded the first girls' school in Esfahan. This was called Maktab Khane-ye Shar'iyat, the School of Religious Studies. Soon after it opened, its Principal was arrested and

imprisoned for three months and Mrs. Dowlat Abadi was forced to leave town and the school was closed down.

A year later, however, Mrs. Dowlat-Abadi founded Sherkate Khavatine Esfahan, the Society of Women of Esfahan. She also published the first women's newspaper called Zabane Zanān, Women's Tongue, to back the aims of this society.

In 1921, she travelled to Tehran and founded Anjomane Azmayeshe Banovan, the Society of Testing Women. This society founded a school for poor girls. After she was forced to move to Tehran, she went to Europe to study educational psychology in Paris. On her return to Iran in 1927, she often appeared in public unveiled. In spite of all the hostilities towards her, she devoted herself to defending the rights of women until her death in 1967.

The Coup d'Etat of 1920 and Reza Shah's policies towards women increased their public activities. Reza Shah, it is claimed, secretly helped the formation of a women's organization called Jamiyate Nesvan-e Vatankhah, The Organization of Patriotic Women, in 1923.<sup>29</sup>

The aims of this society, according to its code and after emphasis on the observation of Islamic laws and regulations, consisted of:

- 1) Efforts in promoting education for girls.
- 2) Encouragement of handicrafts.
- 3) Literacy for women.
- 4) Supporting poor orphan girls.
- 5) Foundation of a hospital for poor women.
- 6) Moral and financial support for defenders of the country in war time.<sup>30</sup>

The activities of this society included the foundation of night classes, and arranging speeches and lectures wherever there was a gathering of women such as in schools, festivals and other places.

The magazine published by this organization was called Nesvan-e Vatankhah, Patriotic Women, by Mohtaram Eskandari. The activities of Mrs. Eskandari in those days were considered so provocative that she was continuously cursed by religious leaders. On one occasion, a religious leader, in his sermon, preached that the aim of this organization was to unveil women. The consequence was that Mrs. Eskandari was stoned.<sup>321</sup>

#### Reconstructing the Female Image

In spite of all the religious opposition to the women's cause, this period in Iranian history marked the beginning of a reconstruction of the female public image, evident as part of the literary revolution that had already begun at the beginning of the century.

In classical Iranian literature and poetry, the general image of women was deeply ambivalent. She was either a beautiful love and sex object who at the same time was as aloof as God and analogous to Him, or she was portrayed as a dragon, snake, devil or other evil creature, who was cunning and unable to speak the truth.<sup>322</sup>

The Koranic and traditional Islamic view on women was also expressed in the view that God created woman inferior to man.<sup>323</sup> She is portrayed as the source of evil who caused the fall of Adam from the Garden of Eden.

The post revolutionary literature and poetry of the early twentieth century however, brought out the importance of education for women. Women, through their active part in the events of the revolution and through their participation in public demonstrations and festivities, had forced men to re-evaluate their conception of women and to consider them as human beings equal to men.

In the late nineteenth century, many male followers of Bahaism and other male intellectuals and radical reformers of the 1880s and 1890s took the cause of women's rights. Some of these were among the followers

of the famous scholar al-Afghani, for example Mirza Malkom Khan (1833-1906) an Armenian Iranian who had been educated in France and was exiled from Iran for forming a society based on Freemasonry. He edited in 1890 a journal called Qanun, "Law", which called for democratic rights. He advocated women's education in one issue in 1890.<sup>34</sup>

Other writers such as Mirza Agha Khan Kermani, the editor of the newspaper Aktar, "Star", Sheikh Ahmad Ruhi and Fathali Akhound-zadeh all favoured women's emancipation and female education and were opposed to polygamy. They all saw the necessity of creating a new generation of Iranian patriots and they felt that this would be achieved only with a proper "healthy" family environment where the mother is educated and has a prominent role as the first educator of the child.<sup>35</sup>

Poets of the constitutional period in the early twentieth century, also rejected the traditional view of women being portrayed as beautiful things, or devils, snakes and dragons. They took on the theme of equality and emancipation for women, criticising polygamy and the veiling of women:

Thy left hand is not inferior to the right;  
Had it worked, it would have been as strong as the right;  
If woman is not like man, the fault is yours;  
We should demand education and art for women.  
"Muhamad Hashim Mirza Afshar"<sup>36</sup>

Poet Lahouti rejects the view of the female as beautiful and projects a new image for her:

I don't appreciate the beauty of one who is ignorant;  
Fascinate me no more by beauty, rather show thy worth!<sup>37</sup>

He also campaigned for the removal of the veil, together with Eshghi, Etesami and other poets of the time:

O lift thy veil ... I long to see thee free  
in the community.  
Lahouti<sup>38</sup>



If two or three speakers join their voice with me,  
An agitation will gradually start in the country,  
And by this agitation the faces of women will be unveiled,  
Pleasure will be derived from social life.  
Else, so long as the women hide their heads in this shroud,  
Half of the Persian nation remains dead.

Eshghi<sup>39</sup>

Eye and heart need a cover of modesty  
Decaying veil is no foundation for Islam.

Etesami<sup>40</sup>

Iraj Mirza tried to stress the equality of male and female while attempting, at the same time, to encourage women themselves to improve their own position through education and through the search for a new self-identity which would help them to destroy the existing gap between men and women.

Are women not human amongst us,  
Or is there in women no power of distinction between good and evil?  
You and I are both human after all  
Equal in creation.

Iraj Mirza<sup>41</sup>

In spite of all their support for the women's cause, male writers and poets still viewed the position of women only within the framework of the family and the prime duty of women, motherhood. Most of these middle-class men had been influenced by the female suffragette movements in Europe, yet their view on the position of women was not a feminist one but a conservative and traditionalist one, with slight variation only from the orthodox Muslim view. The literary revolution did not have an immediate effect on the religious and state authorities. Nor did it change the position of women in Iranian society. It simply started to draw attention to the women's question.

The political events of the Revolution did little to change the attitude of men towards women and women were not given public recognition. Their role was widely under-estimated in the documents published after the revolution. However, the Constitutional Revolution had changed the socio-political system of the country and the

establishment of the parliament brought about relative democracy. At the same time, it opened the way for degrees of secularisation. The effects of this on the lives of women was that more schools for girls were opened and a minority of women were given the opportunity to attend these schools.

Mongol Bayat Philipp comes to the conclusion that the participation of women in the political events of 1905-1911 seem to have been an independent move on their part.<sup>42</sup> There was no historical precedent, she argues, nor any social tradition of organisation and politicisation of women's action to inspire and guide them. Therefore the participation of women, seen in this context, reveals a new nationalistic feeling and a strong desire for official recognition that overwhelmed many women and impelled them into action.

In the course of the Constitutional Revolution, there was women's participation in the movement but there was no independent women's movement as such, with demands specifically related to women's position. Therefore, although the Constitutional Revolution was a turning point in the social position of Iranian women, this progress was followed by a regression in their position. After the fulfilment of the aims of the revolution, which incidentally did not include women's causes, and the restoration of order, women moved back into the private sphere of the house except for a few women who continued to participate in some limited activities. The movement of awakening for women seemed to have been limited to elite urban women.

It was only after the disappointment in the lack of rights offered them in the Constitution that women started to participate in movements for the promotion of the position of women and to establish societies to help achieve this goal. Iranian women then started to assimilate new ideas and to enthusiastically work towards progress knowing that unless

they moved themselves, nothing would be achieved.

Women's activities and their organisations were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War. The Iranian economy was severely disrupted as a result of invasions by the two Imperial powers, Russia and Britain. The Coup d'Etat of February 1921 brought Reza Khan, an army officer, into power and in 1925 he was declared, by the Majlis as the King. This marked the beginning of the Pahlavi rule in Iran, which was to last until the overthrow of Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, by the Islamic Republic in 1979.

## Notes to Chapter 1

1. Girshman, Iran From the Earliest Time to the Islamic Conquest, (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p.308.
2. Martin Haq and E.W. West (trans.) The Book of Arda Viraf, (Bombay: Government Central Book Depot 1972), p.187, rep. in Nash'at, Women and Revolution in Iran, p.9.
3. Girshman, *op.cit.*, p.302.
4. Farrokhrū Parsa et al., Zan Dar Irane Bastan (Women in Ancient Iran), (Teheran Offset Press, 1346/1967), pp.123-55.
5. *Ibid.*
6. See Chapter 4.
7. For more information see Hafiz Farmanfarmayan, "The Forces of Modernization in Nineteenth Century Iran", Fork and Chambers (eds.), Beginnings of Modernisation in the Middle East, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
8. Ettehadieh (ed.), Katerate Tajol Saltane (the Memoirs of Tajol Saltane), (Teheran: 1357/1979).
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. M. Rodinson, Islam and Capitalism, (1974), p.125.
12. For details of this movement refer to N. Keddie, Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protests of 1891-92, (London: Frank Cass, 1966).
13. For more information about these societies refer to Esmail Rahn, Anjomanha-ye Serri dar Enghelabe Mashroutiyyat-e Iran (Secret societies in the Constitutional Revolution of Iran), 2nd ed. (Teheran: Javidan, 2535/1976).
14. See Chapters 2 and 3 for Pahlavi reforms in favour of women.
15. Algerian women did likewise in their struggle for Algerian independence almost fifty years later.
16. Mehdi Malekzadeh, Tarikh-e Enghelab-e Mashroutiyyat (The History of the Constitutional Revolution), vol.3 (Teheran: Ibn Sina, 1330/1951), p.145. Also in Bamdad, From Darkness into Light, pp.40-41.
17. Fari Sheikhol Eslami, Zanane Rouzname Negar Va Andishmand-e Iran, (Teheran: Maz Graphic, 1351/1972), p.85.

18. Badrol al-Molouk Bamdad, From Darkness into Light: Women's Emancipation in Iran, translated by F.R.C. Bagley, (Smithtown, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1977), p.36.
19. William Morgan Shuster, Strangling of Persia, (New York: Century, 1912), p.198.
20. Times, London, 15 September 1908, p.3.
21. Malekzadeh, op.cit., vol.2, p.204.
22. Bamdad, op.cit., pp.37-39.
23. Times, London, 7 December 1911, p.5.
24. Malekzadeh, op.cit., vol.3, pp.62-63.
25. Banani, The Modernisation of Iran 1921-1941, (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1961), p.17.
26. Article 10 of the Constitution said:
 

"Those deprived of the right to vote consist of all females, minors and those under guardians; fraudulent bankrupts, beggars, and those who earn their living in a disreputable way; murderers, thieves and other criminals punished under Islamic law."

Also the Iranian Civil Code Article 5, 1928, gave men the legal right to be the head of the family. The Iranian marriage law of 1931 gave men the right to choose the residence of the family. Iranian Civil Code, Article 117 gave men the right to prevent their wives from having any social and political position that was against their wish. Iranian Civil Code, Article 1133 and 1134 gave men the right to repudiate their wives at any time without having to state any grounds.
27. Times, London, 28 August 1911.
28. Pari Sheikhol Eslami, op.cit., pp.86-87.
29. Sheikhol Eslami, op.cit., p.144.
30. Bamdad, op.cit., pp.63-64.
31. Sheikhol Eslami, op.cit., p.147.
32. For a detailed discussion and examples of the image of women in the classical literature and poetry of Iran refer to Mohammad Ali Jamal Zadeh, Tasvir-e Zan Dar Farhang-e Iran (Women's Image in the Iranian Culture), (Teheran: Amir Kabir, 1357/1979).
33. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
34. Mangol Bayat Philipp, "Women and the REvolution in Iran 1905-1911", Beck & Keddie (ed.), Women in the Muslim World, (Cambridge, Mass.: 1978).

35. Ibid, p.296-7.
36. Bayat Philipp, *op.cit.*, p.304.
37. Lahouti, translated in Bayat Philipp, *op.cit.*, pp.304-305.
38. Ibid.
39. Ali Akbar Moshir Mirsalimi (ed.) Mirzadeh Eshghi: Majmoueye Assar, (Mirzadeh Eshghi: Collected Works), (Teheran: 1965), p.219.
40. Farvin Etesami, Divan-e Ghasaed, (Collected Works), (Teheran: Fardin, 1977), p.154.
41. Bayat Philipp, *op.cit.*, p.304.
42. Bayat Philipp, *op.cit.*

## Chapter 2

### THE IMPACT OF PAHLAVI RULE ON THE POSITION OF WOMEN

The Pahlavi rule in Iran, 1925-1979, was accompanied by the government policies of modernisation and industrialisation of the country. These policies, affected by the increasing involvement of Iran in the world economy, inevitably necessitated very radical changes in the life style of people and encouraged the participation of women in the labour force.

The policies and reforms of the Pahlavi government on the position of women have received praise or criticism by various supporting or opposing groups. The pro-Pahlavi sources put emphasis on the legal reforms of this period which expanded the participation of women in the social, economic, political and educational current. Secular critics, while acknowledging the opportunities created for female education, point to the limits of the reforms from above and the still prevailing legal, economic and social inequalities of this period. The Islamic critics dismiss any advancement of women under the Pahlavi rule and consider the reforms as the source of immorality in the Islamic society and the plot of the colonialist powers against Islam.

This chapter evaluates the impact of the Pahlavi rule on the position of women. The existing contradictory views on the policies of the Pahlavis regarding women makes an objective evaluation difficult. What is evident however is that the Pahlavi period was focused on the formation of a modern centralized state by Reza Shah and the increasing oppressive and coercive use of this state by Mohammad Reza Shah for changing the economic and social structure of Iran. What is again evident is that the newly flourished women's movement in Iran had to suffer in this process and, together with other institutions, become a centralised organisation part of the state.

## POST-REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE

The first decade after the victory of the Constitutionalists and the overthrowing of Mohammad Ali Shah in 1909, was a decade of disillusionment and demoralisation. The Constitutional Revolution had curtailed the absolute power of the monarch and had created a strong legislative body by transferring most of this power to the Majlis but had not created a functioning executive power. In the previous order the monarch and his prime minister headed the government. The Constitutionalists took the power of the monarch away but did not produce an executive power to replace it.

The Majlis faced a series of crises which led to the demoralisation of the Constitutionalists. It was powerless in the face of threats of foreign intervention, namely by the Russians and the British. Facing a weak central government, many provinces formed their own government. The new government was seen as responsible for the crisis that occurred. By 1920, the political discourse had changed from the views of early generations of reformers who had visualised progress only through a constitutional government, to those who began to see democracy as a hindrance to progress. In fact there were some reformers who talked of the necessity of a "revolutionary dictator".<sup>4</sup> In the next few years, the atmosphere was very ripe for a strong centralised state which would implement law and order and would get things going rather than just talking in the Majlis but not being able to act.

It was under this political atmosphere that Reza Shah was able to rise as a powerful head of the army and the government. This atmosphere made the army, headed by Reza Shah, an acceptable agent of progress. Hopes were raised that perhaps where the administrative, educational and constitutional reformers had failed, a centralised, strong army would succeed. Reza Shah's ambition to build a centralised army fitted the new



orientation of the constitutionalists and therefore he enjoyed their support. Thus the last Qajar King Ahmad Shah was deposed and Reza Shah founded the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1925.

## REZA SHAH

### The Army as the Focal Point of the Government

Reza Shah's reign followed a series of reforms geared to restoring order and creating a central European style government. The new government for him consisted primarily of a modern army. In many of his speeches he put emphasis on the army and attributed the progress and strength of the country to its army and the weakness of the country to degradation of its military forces.<sup>2</sup> Thus the army was "...before and above everything. Everything first for the army, and again for the army."<sup>3</sup> Reza Shah saw the army as a model for constructing a nation-state with disciplined and efficient citizens. The soldier thus was the model of a good citizen. This is evident by his speech in 1933, at the national Bank of Iran when addressing the bank employees, he asked them to act as soldiers and give their lives for the prestige of their country as a soldier does on the battlefield.<sup>4</sup>

### Creating Uniformities

The implication of this army as model was his strong drive towards introducing discipline and creating uniformity. An example is the imposition of dress code for both men and women. This has been seen most often, and in particular by the religious critics of Reza Shah, as emulating the Western style clothes. For Reza Shah, however, this was more than just imitating the West. He had introduced a uniform into the army. The uniformed army was based on conscription rather than tribal levies and other groups. The introduction of "civilian uniforms" in a similar way was not just discarding the traditional garb and imitating the West but it signified a step towards the creation of

citizen-soldiers.<sup>9</sup> For Reza Shah, to serve the state was the duty of each citizen and citizens were expected to become part of the growing state bureaucracy as their contribution to the building of the new society. To be a good citizen meant working for the state.

#### REZA SHAH AND THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN'S POSITION

Reza Shah's policies on the expansion of the role of women in Iranian society can be viewed within his wider goal of building a centralised government. This government needed European style institutions and life-style, including the activities of women outside the home. Like men, women were to contribute to the building of the new society by participating in the process of state building. The potential power and labour of women were also needed to help the secularization and modernisation process focal to Reza Shah's policies.

Some policies of Reza Shah in fact helped the goals of women activists. For example, during his reign, public education, including education for women, developed considerably. An increasing number of secondary schools were opened at this time and women graduates of these schools entered Teheran University for the first time in 1935. This period also saw the beginning of women's occupation of minor government jobs.

#### Female Education

Reza Shah was pro the education of women, not so much because he was a feminist defending women's rights, but because he had realised that this would improve Iranian society as a whole. Although many of his reforms defended women's rights to education, this "liberation" of women was more a move to use women in furthering the government's political and economic programmes. During his reign, young girls now had the opportunity to enter the public arena for education and work. The way was opened to women to gradually participate in social and political

activities. Girls' schools were opened to prepare them for this participation.

It has often been argued that Reza Shah's encouragement of female education and participation in the labour force has been because of the need for women's labour in an expanding capitalist economy in Iran. However, some studies show that the development of a market economy has been very marginal to Reza Shah's projects.<sup>6</sup> Reza Shah's emphasis on the need of work and sacrifice for the progress of the government is evident in many of his speeches. In his speech on the occasion of 8 January 1936 (the day the compulsory unveiling law was to be enforced) for example, he addressed a group of female teachers and students and made his expectations of them clear:

Women of this country...could not make their proper contribution to the country and make appropriate sacrifices and render their services. Now they can proceed and enjoy other advantages of society in addition to the remarkable task of motherhood...

I believe that for the progress and happiness of this country, we all must work sincerely, there will be progress if government employees work, the country needs effort and work... Now that you, my daughters and sisters, have entered the social arena...you must know that it is your duty to work for your country. Future prosperity is in your hands. You train the future generation. You can be good teachers and good people can emerge from your training. I expect of you, learned ladies, now that you are going out in the world to learn about your rights and duties and to perform services to your country, you should be wise and work, become accustomed to frugality and avoid luxuries and overspending.<sup>7</sup>

The education of women, however, was very limited and geared to develop their awareness more towards domestic duties, towards husband and family. Women were still expected to be submissive to the wishes of their men. They were not encouraged nor expected to think independently or articulate opinions. The concept of being a female was always a hard barrier against the recruitment of women to schools.

Reza Shah forced people to enrol their daughters at school and used the force of the police to unveil them. But these were not so much successful and this appealing to force as well as departure from

traditional norms, encouraged resistance. However, these attempts had, to an extent, paved the way and women leaders and those who were educated abroad, started their activities to recruit women for education.

This right to education was later backed by a series of legal reforms imposed to help the change in the position of women. These judicial and civil reforms, as well as the rise in the standard of hygiene, were to women's benefit. The age of marriage for girls was raised to fifteen and for boys to eighteen. This reduced child marriages and thus encouraged parents to send their daughters to primary schools before they were married off. Also marriages were required to be registered and as only registered marriages were recognised, the practice of sigheh, temporary marriage, was restricted and was considered shameful.

#### The Unveiling Act

The unveiling of the female population was another major step taken by Reza Shah in his efforts to free women from the boundaries of the house and the prevailing oppression. He decreed the abolition of the veil in 1936. The policy of unveiling women enabled them to move about more freely and there were tremendous attempts, on the part of the state, to encourage women's participation in the labour force. Women at the same time became targets of Western consumerism. They were now more able, and encouraged, to buy foreign consumer products such as clothes, make-up and other luxury items as they were now forced to wear western-style clothes.

Reza Shah's intention maybe was to "liberate" women but he paved the way for women to become targets of consumerism. All these changes were geared to "emancipate" women, however, in joining the social, political and economic life, women were now exploited both in the public and in the private world.

To many women activists and their supporters, the veil was the symbol of female subjugation and backwardness. The veil had been denounced by these women and the intellectual poets and writers of that time, but the opposition to the unveiling of women was causing many of them to refrain from going to public places. They literally imprisoned themselves in their homes and, for example, would not even go out to the public baths. Despite the fact that progressive women had pressed for the lifting of the chador for a long time, they condemned this insulting and forced method and believed that the elimination of the chador should be brought about by preparing women so that they would accept this law with awareness and by volunteering.

#### Cooperation of Women Activists

During Reza Shah's rule, constitutionalist reformers faced a dilemma. On the one hand, most of their proposed reforms were now possible to achieve, on the other hand, these were achieved not through a democratic parliamentary system as they had originally thought the Constitutional Revolution would bring about, but through a dictatorial construction of the state. The dilemma for women reformers, for example, was that all independent women's organisations and publications were banned but at the same time, the state implemented specific reforms in favour of women, such as opening of girls' schools, encouraging higher education for women and their participation in the public arena and the banning of the veil.

The two issues of the veil and education for women had been at the centre of any concern for advancement of women by reformers of the constitutional era. Women reformers now had to face a choice: whether to give up their own reformist work until democratic conditions again prevailed or to cooperate with the state and achieve something for women. The majority of these women chose to cooperate with the state. The

outcome of the Constitution had been disappointing for these women,<sup>6</sup> whereas, despite the repressive character of Reza Shah's rule, the new regime had shown interest in women's issues and had the power to enforce them and therefore could be used to their advantage.

#### DECLINE OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

##### Coercion and Censorship

Reza Shah was interested in changing the condition and improving the social position of women but was against any independent activities that supported the expansion of the women's cause. The only legitimate way to achieve changes that he perceived right for the Iranian society was to be through government action. As his reign continued, government control also increased. All independent and democratic institutions such as labour unions and political parties were banned. The Constitution was amended to his benefit and the Majlis became a tool to enforce his wishes. In 1931, the Majlis passed a law declaring communist and anti-monarchical parties illegal. Censorship was enforced on the media. A number of liberal newspapers, most of them supportive of women's rights, ceased publication. Women's periodicals were subject to this censorship too. Various women's groups in their periodicals asked for more radical changes concerning the position of women. Women who wrote in these periodicals while endorsing Reza Shah's policies in favour of women, occasionally also criticised the shortcomings of governmental actions. An example of these is Alam-e Nesvan, Women's Universe magazine, which was published until the mid 1930s.

##### Control over Women's Organisations

The force and repression that accompanied Reza Shah's policies was harmful to the cause of women's advancement because it hindered the development of a conscious political culture and experience among women. An example of this is the Organisation of Patriotic Women Jam-iyat-e

Nesvan-e Vatan Khah, an organisation formed in 1922 by a group of constitutionalist women with socialist tendencies. The founder of this organisation, Mohtaram Eskandari, was the wife of Soleiman Eskandari, the Socialist Party leader active in the 1920s.

At the beginning of his rise to power, Reza Shah used various political groups to reinforce his grip over the political system, but once this firm control was established, he began to eliminate all independent and democratic groups. The Organisation of patriotic Women was at first encouraged by Reza Shah but later, although its aims were not against the welfare of the country, it was closed down in 1932.<sup>7</sup> Instead, a small group of high school teachers and university students were commanded by Reza Shah, in 1935, to create a social and cultural organisation for women called the Ladies' Centre, Kanoun-e Banovan. Mrs. Tarbiyat was chosen as the president of this centre. This organisation was to replace all independent women's groups. All its policies and activities were defined and ordered by the government. The closing down of the Organisation of Patriotic Women in 1932 could be viewed as the end of independent women's rights movements in Iran since it was the last independently formed women's organisation.

The censorship of the media was followed by the government's control over women's organisations and activities. The formation of the Ladies Centre marked the beginning of this control and the manipulation of women's activities. The goals of the Ladies Centre were to improve the morality of women, to train women in modern methods of housework and childcare, to encourage the use of domestic products and to establish charity centres to help poor mothers and orphans.<sup>10</sup> It held lectures and exhibitions for mixed audiences and sponsored sports events for women. One of its initial major aims was also to encourage the unveiling of women. When the organisation was founded, a year before the passing of

the unveiling law, all its members were unveiled. It therefore seems likely that they were urged to encourage unveiling even before the passing of the law.<sup>11</sup> The meetings of this organisation were often attended by Reza Shah's daughters, Ashraf and Shams.

The organisation of the Ladies Centre differed from previous women's organisations in three ways. It was not a female initiated organisation but was established under the influence of the government and was able to use funds available to it through the Ministry of Culture.<sup>12</sup> This kind of relationship between the government and a woman's organisation had never existed before. It was not a feminist organisation advocating equal rights for women. Instead it followed traditional lines and governmental policies on women. The Ladies Centre's activities were also geared towards social work and charity for women. This systematic pursuit of charity work was also unprecedented among women's groups. The charity work of this organisation expanded greatly during the Pahlavi reign. This was a way of involving active middle class women in projects controlled by the government. They were also in line with Reza Shah's views of the position and activities of women. Reza Shah was not an advocate of women's rights but he was interested in changing only those aspects of women's life that would help in the modernisation of the country. His views on women can be illustrated from the following quote by his son:

Reza Shah never advocated a complete break with the past, for always he assumed that our girls could find their best fulfilment in marriage and in the nurture of superior children. But he was convinced that a girl could be a better wife and mother, as well as a better citizen, if she received an education and perhaps worked outside the home long enough to gain a sense of civic functions and responsibilities.<sup>13</sup>

Reza Shah's policies helped a small group of upper class women but did not draw the support of the majority of women. There were no social and economic conditions at that time that could support such policies.



Once the force was removed, these were abandoned too and again the case of women could be used as an example.

#### FORMATION OF NEW WOMEN'S ORGANISATION

##### Backlash by Religious Leaders

After Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, a backlash led by religious authorities, who had lost most of their power as a result of Reza Shah's policies, almost wiped away the small gains that women had made in the previous period. These religious leaders were determined to regain their lost control over society by emphasising Shi'ite public morality and culture.<sup>14</sup> There was a great effort on their part to restore the usage of the veil by women. This proved not to be difficult. Many urban women who had been affected, were more than willing to resume the veil. A number of schools for girls were closed down as a result of religious leaders' opposition to women's education.<sup>15</sup>

The religious leaders' attempts to fully reverse the position of women, however, were not successful. Certain forces helped the goal of feminist movements which had started from the period immediately after the Constitutional Revolution. The atmosphere of democracy and freedom that replaced the authoritarian and dictatorial character of Reza Shah's reign, counteracted the efforts of religious leaders in pushing women back from the public activities into the private space of home.

##### Campaign for Women's Rights

Immediately after Reza Shah's censorship was lifted, in a short period of political freedom, independent political activities flourished. During this time, a number of women's organisations were also formed. The rapid socio-economic development of the following three decades were very influential in the improvement of the position of women.

A consistent campaign advocating women's rights was launched by the Hezb-e Toudeh, the Communist Party of Iran. This campaign attracted most

students, teachers, and educated women of that period. Some of the earlier activists joined the efforts of this campaign and in cooperation with other female members, formed the Anjoman-e Demokratik-e Zanan, the Democratic Society of Women in 1949. This group published a journal called Bidari-ye Ma, Our Awakening. This society was active in creation of educational clubs for women. It campaigned for suffrage for women, equal pay for equal work and expansion of public education for girls.<sup>16</sup> On the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Constitutional Revolution in 1952, this society demanded the extension of suffrage to women and they were able to collect 100,000 signatures for the extension of the right to vote for women.<sup>17</sup> The Constitutional amendment was discussed in Parliament but the Prime Minister, Mossadegh, had to withdraw the bill under pressure from religious leader members of Parliament.<sup>18</sup>

Women's organisations formed during this period did not have the independence characteristics of many earlier feminist groups. They were usually affiliated to another party or organisation that had emerged upon Reza Shah's departure. The political ideologies of these parties varied from far right to far left thus the ideology of their women's groups also varied. For example, the Democratic Society of Women very clearly expressed radical views on women's rights.

The Ladies' Centre continued to function and pursued its activities as before emphasising the traditional stand on women's rights. Its members conducted literacy, sewing and cookery classes, and etiquette and proper behaviour for women were also taught. It remained very strongly pro-government, praising the efforts of the Pahlavi Dynasty for improving women's position.

Some of the older pioneers of the women's movements in the 1920s became increasingly involved with devotion to the women's cause.<sup>19</sup> Two major women's organisations were founded by these women, former members

of the Ladies' Centre. The first organisation, founded in 1942, was Sazeman-e Zanān, Women's league, later renamed the Women's League of Supporters of Human Rights, Jam-iyat-e Zanān-e Tarafdār-e Hoohough-e Rashar. The major objective of this organisation was to improve the legal conditions of women. It published a newspaper called Zan-e Emrouz, Woman of Today, which, along with other liberal newspapers was banned in 1945. Hezb-e Zanān, Women's Party was founded in 1944. These organisations had similar goals to the Democratic Society of Women but were less radical. In fact, in the same year, these two women's groups signed a pact announcing their struggle against the oppressed condition of women, to fight those opposed to education of women and to initiate activities to raise consciousness of different classes of women.<sup>20</sup>

#### Characteristics of Women's Groups

Women's organisations of this period (1941-1952) were different from the women's groups set up by the Reza Shah's government. These organisations were independent of the state and articulated radical views on women's position and rights. However, although they enjoyed a democratic atmosphere to conduct their activities, their close affiliation with other political groups limited their feminist activities a great deal.

The close association of these groups with non-feminist political groups meant that always the issue of women's rights was secondary to the major aim of the political parties. The priority was always given to the general cause rather than the specific cause of women's rights. This not only had been damaging the cause of women, but it fractured the essential solidarity among women as they followed their party lines. An example is the dialogue of criticism between the Ladies' Centre and the Women's Party. The Ladies' Centre was criticised by the Women's Party for having prevented the progress of women under Reza Shah's dictatorship and it

accused the Women's Party of being too radical and ignoring female duties that nature had appointed to women. Young members of the Women's Party were accused of being loose and of supporting the foreign cause, whereas the ladies' Centre claimed that it was only for Iranian nationalism and thus did not support any party.

#### Post-war Political Atmosphere

The hostile attitude and lack of unity as well as the absence of a coherent ideology among women reflected the Iranian political atmosphere of the time. The country once again was politically in a state of chaos and the new Shah was not powerful enough to gain control of the situation.

In 1949 four political parties with different ideologies formed a coalition and founded the National Front, Jebhe-ye Meli headed by Mohammad Mossadegh. The major goal of the National Front was the nationalisation of the oil industry. Soon the national Front gained mass support. The oil industry was nationalised but Mossadegh resigned over a dispute with the Shah. This triggered demonstrations, Mossadegh was re-elected as Prime Minister, and the Shah left the country only to return with a coup d'etat in 1953.

#### MOHAMMAD REZA SHAH

##### Change in the Character of Pahlavi Government

Important changes took place in the character of the Pahlavi government under Mohammad Reza Shah, in particular after his return to power in 1953. The following decade was a crucial period in political and social affairs for Iran as several factors formed the basis of the political and socio-economic developments of the following decades.

The significant change in the character of the state was that it shifted from traditional monarchy and became more and more autonomous from civil society. This was possible because of the increasing oil

revenues. The state was no longer dependent on internal taxation for revenues or internal production for survival therefore the limited political participation of the elite became limited even further and was eventually reduced to the person of the Shah. This was evident by comparing the elections of the Majlis in the 1950s when it was dominated by landlords and aristocrats who represented the dominant powers of their regions. These were elected because they had regional power and thus local peasants would vote for them.

With the elections of the 21st Majlis from 1965 onward, candidates now were selected by the Ministry of the Interior with the approval of the Shah himself. In this way the old political elite were no longer decision-makers, they were depoliticised and a new class of technocrats were appointed by the Shah and the Shah came to see himself as the State, rather than like his father as the embodiment of the State. This is evident from his writings.<sup>221</sup> He eventually became the sole decision-maker who viewed himself as the "source of benevolence from whom all progress emanated",<sup>222</sup> and who wanted to push Iran towards "the Great Civilisation". In his book of the same title, he claims that "there should not be a case where we have not foreseen and have not made the necessary decisions."<sup>223</sup> The Iranian society was to move towards "the Great Civilisation" according to his great plan which did not leave room for any initiative on the part of the citizen. In other words, citizens were not expected to contribute to the building of the state as was the case with Reza Shah but to be its beneficiaries.

The White Revolution, the Shah's programme of socio-economic reforms, was to pave the way for his grand plan. In the process, political parties lost their powers and were replaced by the one state party of New Iran, Hezbe Iran-e Novin. Later, at the beginning of the 1970s, this was also abolished and the Resurrection Party,

Hezbe-Kastakniz became the only legitimate party and all citizens were under obligation to register with this party. This was the last blow to any thought of democracy.

A third major shift during this period was the emergence of Islam as a new political paradigm in Iran. Important sectors of the clergy became very politicised under the leadership of Khomeini. They enjoyed the support of secular politics that, with no avenues left for expression, were Islamicised and joined the opposition.

The emergence of guerilla groups was also a product of the political repression typical of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign. The two major guerilla organisations of Mojahedin-e Khalq-e Iran and Fadayan-e Khalq Iran were formed during this period.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Centralisation of Women's Organisation

With political and socio-economic changes under Mohammad Reza Shah, the question of women also underwent changes. As secular politics diminished, the importance given to the women's question amongst the opposition also narrowed and eventually Islamicised and moralised. Its space was also eliminated in the upper class politics where important initiatives usually originated from, and was replaced by the initiatives of the state, which meant those of the Shah.

The Shah's attitude towards the question of women was very indicative of his wider outlook. Like everything else, women's rights were to be grants given to them by him.<sup>25</sup> All female initiative, even in the form of charity became centralised and controlled by the state. Again, as in the case of society as a whole, it was his initiative that counted.

Many women's organisations that had been formed in the 1940s were gradually absorbed into a centralised women's organisation headed by Ashraf Pahlavi, the Shah's twin sister, under the name of Women's

Organisation of Iran, Sazeman-e Zanān-e Iran<sup>26</sup>. The WOI became a very important tool to boost the Shah's image as the champion of women's rights in Iran in international circles. Inside Iran, the WOI used the energy and ability of women activists for its projects. Under the prevailing circumstances, some very prominent women's rights activists had chosen to cooperate with the Shah in order to get some reforms carried out in favour of women. The efforts and initiative of these women were influential in the reforms of the White Revolution concerning women. These reforms, however, were not presented as women's initiatives but were to be presented as original ideas of the monarch himself. Whereas the status of women under Reza Shah was seen as a symbol of the modernity of the society and the new state, during Mohammad Reza Shah's rule it became the symbol of modernity of the Shah and his progressive view on the question of women.

#### Position of Women

The Coup d'Etat of 1953, and the downfall of Mossadegh's government was the end of the short-lived democratic atmosphere in Iran. Mohammad Reza Shah began his rule with the formation of the Secret Police, SAVAK, which helped increase his authoritarian reign. This also marked the end of any opposition political parties and their affiliated women's groups. This, however, did not end the aspirations of women who had actively supported the campaign for women's rights.

By this time Iranian women were exposed to participation in the wider society. Whereas previously women had been restricted to traditional roles of bath attendants, seamstresses for women clothes, masseurs, epilators, servants and, later, midwives or school teachers, by the 1950s, amongst the middle classes, there were women with degrees in law, medicine, philosophy and education and lower class women were exposed to factory work in the weaving and textile industry. Previously

women and children of the lower classes would work as carpet-weavers in private homes or small factories for traders.

However, work was still considered demeaning for most middle class and upper class women of independent means. Women's economic dependence on their menfolk had convinced them of their inferiority and incapability in achieving economic independence. Nevertheless, this was also changing in the last two decades. The Pahlavi efforts and programmes of modernisation had their impact on women in particular and gradually women of all classes participated in different professions. By the 1960s, women university graduates and professionals were competing for admittance to the different sectors of important industrial complexes such as the oil or copper industry and the steel mills as engineers, doctors, or administrative personnel. These innovations drew much reaction and controversy on the part of the religious groups and traditionalists who interpreted this as an invasion of their rights and space.

The authoritarian rule of Mohammad Reza Shah also had affected the power and authority of religious leaders, the major group opposing women's suffrage. Individual women had the opportunity to increase their efforts to improve women's rights. Older generation women and the new recruits of professional women and students were effective in the inclusion of suffrage for women in the initial six points of the White Revolution.<sup>27</sup> The Shah claimed to have "granted" the right to vote to women. It was because of his support of the women's rights in the face of the religious leaders' opposition that the franchise for women was enacted into the law. However, it was the efforts of many conscious and devoted women in the last fifty years before the White Revolution that had prepared the ground for the final passing of this law in 1963. In that year, women participated for the first time in the election campaign



and a few were elected. A few years later, in 1967, the Family Protection Law<sup>29</sup> and in 1973 its Amendment were passed. These two laws have been very significant in the improvement of the position of women.

An overall look at the Pahlavi period shows that women have enjoyed a better position in legal terms. However, these changes were all imposed by the government and were not the result of a conscious demand on the part of the majority of women and thus these "granted" rights were not enjoyed by the majority of them. In many cases, these were misused or even neglected by both men and women. The Pahlavi regime, since the Coup d'Etat of 1953, had raised the middle class women's consciousness by improving their educational and legal rights but, nevertheless, it deprived them of any possibilities for promoting an independent and genuine women's movement. The small but significant wave of feminist activities and demands that had started with the Constitutional Revolution was taken over and turned into yet another instrument promoting the regime's image and influence. By so doing, the whole concept of women's emancipation was degenerated for the majority of the population who later identified it as another fad of the regime and a manifestation of its decadence and commitment to foreign culture.

## Notes to Chapter 2

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2. A.R. Sadeghipour (ed.) Collection of Speeches by the Late Majesty Reza Shah the Great, (Teheran: Javidan, 1968), p.41. Rep. in Najmabadi 1987.
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4. Ibid. p.154.
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6. S. Akhavi, "State Formation and Consolidation in Twentieth Century Iran: The Reza Shah Period and the Islamic Republic", Banuazizi, A. and M. Weiner (eds.) The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), 1986. Rep. in Najmabadi 1987.
7. A.R. Sadeghipour, *ibid.*, pp.137-39.
8. See Chapter 1.
9. See Chapter 1 for a description of the aims of this organisation.
10. Pari Sheikhol-Eslami, Zanan-e Rouznameh Negar Va Andishmand-e Iran, (Teheran: Maz Grafic, 1351/1972), p.89.
11. Badr al-Molouk Bamdad, Zan-e Irani Az Enghelab-e Mashroutiyat Ta Enghelab-e Sefid, (Teheran: Ebn-e Sina, 1347/1968), p.91.
12. Sedigheh Dowlat-Abadi, "Gozaresh-e Dahomin Sal-e Tahsili-ye Kanoun-e Banovan" (Report on the Tenth Academic Year of the Ladies Centre), Zaban-e Zanan, no.3, Khordad 1324/June 1945, p.10.
13. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Mission for My Country, p.231.
14. See Shahrokh Akhavi, Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), pp.23-61.
15. Bamdad, *op.cit.*, p.106.
16. Abrahamian, *op.cit.*, pp.335-336.
17. Guity Nash'at (ed.) Women and Revolution in Iran, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983), p.29.
18. Akhavi, *op.cit.*, 1980, p.63.
19. Among them Sedigheh Dowlat-Abadi, Mojaher Tarbiyat, Badr al-molouk Bamdad, Shams al-Molouk Mosaheb, Mehrangiz Manouchehrian, Farokhrou Parsa and Batoul Sami'i could be mentioned.
20. Bidari-ye Ma, 2nd year, no.2, Mordad 1324/1945, p.4.

21. For example see Pahlavi, 1980.
22. Tabari, 1987, p.17.
23. Pahalvi, 1978, p.89.
24. These groups are discussed in Chapter 7.
25. See Pahalvi, 1967 and 1980.
26. This is discussed in Chapter 3.
27. See Chapter 3 for details.
28. See Chapter 3 for details of Family Protection Law.

## Chapter 3

### WOMEN'S ORGANISATION OF IRAN AND THE WHITE REVOLUTION

This chapter will analyse women's status and their activities during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign. First the gradual centralisation of women's activities into the one centralised organisation, the Women's Organisation of Iran (WOI), will be examined. Then the effects of the reforms of the White Revolution on the legal position of women will be evaluated.

#### CENTRALISATION OF WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that the activities of newly formed women's groups of the 1940s were gradually centralised by the government of Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1950s. In this way the activities of women's groups became under the control of the state authorities.

Since 1932 there had been no independent movement for women's rights. During the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, any political movement was seen as anti-Shah activity and independent movements were banned. The women's rights issue therefore was never raised in the context of a political movement. Instead, the women's rights movement was institutionalised by the government and was allowed a sphere of activities approved by the government.

Two major events paved the way for the process of centralisation of women's groups in Iran. The first was an increase in the number of women's organisations during 1956-66. These organisations were either welfare organisations such as the Charity Association of Soraya, Bonyad-e Nikoukari-ye Soraya, or they were professional associations such as the Iranian Women's Medical Association.<sup>1</sup> The non-charity women's organisations which had survived the post war years, had changed their names and identities. This was done because for these organisations, to

become legitimate organisations loyal to the growing power of the Shah, a departure from their earlier stand was necessary. For example, the Women's Party changed its name to the Women's Council, Shora-ye Zanān.

The second major event was the development of activities designed to establish the control of the courts over women's actions. For example, in 1956, various women's organisations were asked by the Ministry of Labour to organise a widely publicised mass meeting of women. A declaration was announced which condemned social segregation of the sexes and demanded "new rights" for women. Then the Federation of Women's Organisations was founded in Teheran. The Federation was formed of fourteen organisations, each having two members on the executive board. The Federation became the centre of contact for the exchange of information and planned lectures and meetings with visiting women leaders.<sup>22</sup>

#### The High Council of Women

About two years after the declaration, however, the Federation was dissolved and a new institution, the High Council of Iranian Women, Shora-ye Ali-ye Jam-iyat-e Zanān-e Iran, was formed with Princess Ashraf, the Shah's sister, at its honorary head. The major goals of this organisation were to recruit and train volunteers who would teach reading and writing classes for women, rehabilitation courses for women ex-prisoners and also to expand international contact. Eighteen women's associations were members of the High Council. It consisted of various committees and had branches in every province. It increasingly became a bureaucratic organisation.

The 1950s was thus the period of centralisation of different women's groups. In comparison to Reza Shah's coercive way of involving women in the bureaucracy of the government, Mohammad Reza Shah's government encouraged organisational co-option of women under one central

organisation for women. Most other women's organisations were not declared illegal but to be recognised as legitimate, they had to all join the High Council. The High Council was also the only entity through which demands for women's rights could reach government agencies.

The High Council membership was mostly of upper class and upper middle class women who used the opportunity to busy themselves. To them, lower class women, unable to represent themselves, were just there to receive charity. These upper class women lacked the courage and egalitarian idealism of the women activists of the 1920s. These women instead concentrated on obtaining legal changes for women.

#### THE WOMEN'S ORGANISATION OF IRAN

##### The Constitution

The High Council was replaced by the Women's Organisation of Iran, Sazeman-e Zanane Iran, in 1966. The High Council apparently had had difficulties in dealing with large-scale activities of women. The new organisation had a new constitution and was a more complex bureaucratic organisation with ability to perform various functions. Its constitution, however, went through several changes in the following years. Its general goal, according to its 1975 constitution, was the enhancement of the cultural, social, economic and political knowledge of women. This was to be achieved through various activities as follows:

1. To defend the personal, family and social rights of women by providing equal rights in legal and social spheres.
2. To conduct a literacy campaign to improve women's education.
3. To prepare and coordinate women for active participation in the national development within the confines of the Rastakhiz Party.
4. To assist women in performing their individual, social, economic, cultural and political responsibilities.

5. To extend friendly relations between Iranian women and women from other countries.
6. To establish family welfare centres.<sup>2</sup>

The WOI Constitution had, in 1968 stated that the organisation was not a political organisation. However, as was evident in its 1976 Constitution, one year after the establishment of the Rastakhiz Party, its constitution was changed to recognize that it was a political entity within the system dictated by the party. The WOI was not formally the women's branch of the party but it was viewed by people to be that.

#### Bureaucratic Structure

Decision-making bodies of the WOI were the office of the President, the General Assembly, the High Committee of Cooperation, the Central Council and the Office of the Secretary General. The General Assembly consisted of representatives of member organisations and representatives from the WOI assemblies in the provinces. Among its duties was electing five members to the General Council for four-year terms. The High Committee of Cooperation was formed of eleven individuals and these included the prime minister, other ministers, presidents of Programming and Finance, Television and Radio, the Office of Employment Agencies, the Anti-illiteracy Campaign Committee, and the secretary general of the WOI. The High Committee met at least every six months to coordinate responsibilities between different ministries in planning and implementing the programmes of WOI for women. The Central Council had eleven members elected by General Assembly and the president and their work was voluntary. The Council would meet on a monthly basis to discuss issues such as reviewing and approving the budget. The secretary general was appointed by the president and his duties included supervising all activities of the organisation and participating in all meetings of the General Assembly and the Central Council.

The WOI was a large bureaucratic organisation which had 400 branches throughout the country. Its members were not necessarily involved in women's rights issues. Many of its members were professionals such as teachers, nurses and government employees whose associations belonged to WOI and thus they became automatically members of WOI. Those people in leadership and decision-making positions had to be approved by the government and they were selected because of their social background. In other words, they were individuals in total agreement with the government. In pursuing issues concerning women, it was obliged to follow ways acceptable to the government and thus was controlled by the government.

#### Programme of Activities

WOI pursued several programmes concerning women. In 1967 it created Family Welfare Centres in different parts of the country. These centres provided education, health care, legal help, and child care centres for women. They were more to attract the urban lower class women. The literacy and vocational classes were very important to the women of these classes. These centres offered classes in sewing, carpet weaving, typing, and hairdressing which were all traditionally in the sphere of women. These centres also provided information on health care, family planning and childcare. They had clinics that issued contraceptives to women. Legal councils of these centres would also give advice on legal issues of interest to women such as the custody of children, divorce, inheritance law and so on.

Another of WOI's programmes was the establishment of a School of Social Work in 1969 in Varamin. This school gave associate degrees in social work. Graduates of this school would then be sent to work in Family Welfare Centres throughout the country.



A major contribution of the WOI was in research on women. Its subject of studies addressed issues of discrimination against women, the sexist portrayal of women in school textbooks, status of rural and tribal women, the portrayal of women in television commercials and the question of the veil. It also arranged for lectures, seminars and conferences on women's issues.

The WOI was a very active organisation which officially represented Iranian women in international conferences on women. In the 1970s, the WOI began to concentrate more on the non-traditional activities for women such as legal reforms in favour of women. The WOI was, in most cases, criticised by both reformist and conservative elements. Reformists accused the organisation of contributing nothing to women's rights while conservatives thought it was too liberal and in particular too anti-religious. They both viewed it as the puppet of the ruling classes and the government.

#### Positive Steps

In spite of these criticisms and its shortcomings, the WOI had taken positive steps towards the welfare of women. For example, the establishment of Family Welfare Centres was ideal for reaching the women of lower classes and tackling some of their problems. These centres sometimes became the source of profit for some corrupt officials, however, this was more a reflection of the political system of the whole country rather than that of the WOI.

The most positive aspect of the WOI was its legal work concerning women. The Family Welfare Centres had legal counselling services for lower class women. The WOI also discussed legal issues and the legal rights of women in its classrooms and seminars and published books on women's legal rights, some written in simple language to be used by those who could read. The organisation's ability to pursue legal changes

through various government authorities was increased by the formation of the High Council of Cooperation.

WOI tried to keep a low profile where major legal changes were concerned and was very careful not to antagonise the anti-women's rights groups but it lobbied quietly within the government bureaucracy for changing discriminatory laws in favour of women. A few of its feminists had lobbied for the Family Protection Act of 1967, the labour and abortion law. However, most of its members were not involved in supporting legal change for women or conscious about the women's rights issue.

#### Negative Aspects

The major weakness of WOI was its identification with the state, Princess Ashraf's presidency and also the composition of the Central Council formed of upper class women had created low regard for it among the majority of people. As the government became less and less respected by people, the organisation was identified with it and became the target of resentment and positive steps that it had taken towards the welfare of women were overshadowed by it.

The WOI also lacked control over the composition of its leadership and membership of its branches. As a result, usually in towns and cities, wives of influential government officials would monopolise its membership. During elections, they would elect one another, thus preventing the election or higher participation rate of the lower class and working class women.<sup>4</sup>

Another shortcoming was that it was not clear how well basic orders from Teheran were implemented. This contributed to the ambiguity of the role of the WOI. A survey of working class women in Teheran, Qazvin, and Kashan, conducted under the auspices of the WOI<sup>5</sup> showed that the majority did not know much about the organisation. This was a major blow to the

organisation's claim that its major programmes were aimed at lower class women).

The major negative aspect of the WOI was that it acted according to rules that were set out by the government and in pursuing its programmes on the issues concerning women, it had no choice but to follow ways acceptable to the government. In order to do this, there were a number of control mechanisms present in the WOI's structure.

The leadership of the WOI, such as the secretary general and the members of the Central Council, had to be approved by the government. Ever since the foundation of the WOI, its president had been Princess Asraf, the Shah's sister and the Vice-president, Mrs. Farideh Diba, the Queen's mother. The positions of these two women were honorary, therefore the assumption would be that they did not exert influence and power. However, according to the Constitution of the organisation, the president appointed six out of eleven members of the Central Council which constitutes a majority vote to pass or to stop the passage of an issue. The president also appointed the secretary general and the General Assembly convened only with the permission of the president. In other words, the president, the Shah's sister, had most power and influence in the top decision-making bodies of WOI.

The financial resources of WOI also worked as another control mechanism. Apparently the member of the Chapters and the leadership board worked on a voluntary basis and the WOI budget, with the exception of special projects, was provided from donations, membership fees, and classes. Special projects such as literacy courses, family-planning clinics, creches and the like were funded by the government on the basis of proposals submitted by the organisation. The staff of these projects were paid by that budget. Therefore there was always a close financial relationship between the organisation and the government. Considering

the authoritarian and non-democratic nature of the government, the WOI was unable to survive financially or otherwise without the consent of the government and as a result it always had to take a pro-establishment stand and had to function within the limits set by the state.

### THE WHITE REVOLUTION

The White Revolution was a set of reforms introduced by Mohammad Reza Shah in 1963 to implement socio-economic and political changes that accompanied the process of modernisation, industrialisation and Westernisation of the country. Among the initial main points of the White Revolution was the granting of suffrage to women. This, although faced with severe opposition from the religious leaders, was followed by further legal reforms concerning the status of women. The most important of these legal reforms was the Family Protection Act which improved the position of women within the family.

### Legal Reforms Concerning Women

In researching the legal status of women in Iran, one finds little information dealing with the period prior to the Constitutional Revolution. At that time, most laws relevant to the family and therefore women, were articulated in the context of the Sharia and included laws relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance and determining custody of children. Up to the early twentieth century and before the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11, there were two legal systems:

1. Sharia, which was law concerned with human social behaviour and this was based on Islamic jurisprudence.
2. Urf or custom, the administrative laws which were based on a series of precedents and regulations as well as on the orientation of the King in power.<sup>4</sup>

The urf or qanoun courts had jurisdiction over matters which involved the state. However, in practice the Sharia courts had nearly all

judicial authority.<sup>7</sup>

After the Constitutional Revolution, in 1911, a reorganisation of the judiciary system took place and a civil code of law was set up by a French jurist. Nevertheless, the religious leaders pressurised the government not to enact any laws that were contradictory to Sharia, the Islamic law.<sup>8</sup> Non-religious law, such as civil and criminal law, dealt mostly with taxation and punishment and the like. It did not deal directly with the issue of women. Laws relating to women and the family were limited to the framework of religious law because women were limited to the home and did not participate in public, economic or social matters and consequently, were not affected by these public laws. It is therefore not evident what would have happened to a woman had she been faced with these laws. In these situations, a woman's guardian or attorney would represent her; these guardians were usually her father, husband or brother. For example, in researching the issue of women's punishment, one finds no mention of women's prisons, again complicating an accurate historical evaluation of this issue. The only known historical example of the trial and punishment of a woman before the Constitutional Revolution was that of Ghoratol'ein. She was sentenced to death by stoning and this type of punishment was a prescription of Islamic law of that time and not the civil law.<sup>9</sup>

In the period of the Constitutional Revolution, despite the fact that there was a strong emphasis on the enactment of civil and non-religious law, women's legal position remained in the context of the family. They were not given the right to vote as citizens, rather they were dealt with at the same level as bankrupts, and the insane. This attitude is reflected in the way in which the national Assembly of that time dealt with the topic of women. The question of women was hardly ever debated in the Majlis and even when one or two progressive members

of the National Assembly brought forward the issue of recognising women as equal beings, they were met with much opposition by most members of the National Assembly, who were extremely religious.

It becomes evident that before the White Revolution of 1963, women's legal status did not experience significant transformation. Prior to 1963, the only law that directly affected the condition of women was enacted during the reign of Reza Shah. In 1936, the wearing of the chador was made illegal; this law was part of Reza Shah's move to Westernise and modernise Iranian society. It also affected men in that it forced them to put away their traditional garb and take on Western methods of clothing, jacket and trousers.

With the technological advancement and Western influence during this period, the Sharia law which was the basis for the judiciary system also went through changes. In 1925, a committee was formed within the Ministry of Justice which presented to parliament the first volume of the Civil Code. This new code was a combination of the Sharia law and the translation of the Civil Code of France.

In matters regarding family and individual status, this code was in total conformity with the orthodox Islamic law, for example, with regard to divorce it gave the total right of divorce to the husband and specified all the causes for divorce in articles 1057-58 and 1133-1142. However, in 1932, the Majlis passed a series of laws which prohibited the religious leaders from registering legal documents including marriage and divorce and transactions concerning property. Registering these kind of documents had previously been not only one of their important sources of income but prestige in the community. The registering of these matters was then put under the authority of the civil courts. In spite of the limits put on the power and function of the religious leaders and Sharia courts, as a result of the absence of well defined procedures for the

civil courts, Sharia courts continued to have jurisdiction over matters regarding marriage and divorce, waqhf (religious endowment), guardianship and wills.

During Reza Shah's period, civil laws relevant to women did not experience any specific change. Western influence was more on the judiciary system than on any other,<sup>40</sup> and the traditional Sharia concepts lasted more in laws governing family relations, marriage and divorce. The Western laws were easily accepted in commercial and business affairs as well as government, but the laws concerning the family and women were affected least by the legal system; the family institution, its ideology and functions were left intact.

The laws regarding the position of women within the family remained unchanged with the male head of the family maintaining his dominant position with regard to marriage, divorce, custody of children and the like, and did not provide women with substantive rights. Legal inequality was not limited to family, but exhibited sexism in other spheres such as work, becoming a witness and the inheritance law.<sup>41</sup>

#### The Suffrage Act

The most formative change relevant to women took place from the period of the White Revolution onwards. The Iranian Constitution of 1906-11 had deprived women, along with minors, the insane, fraudulent bankrupts and murderers, of the right to vote.<sup>42</sup> Thus women were not just second class citizens but were also categorised with beggars and criminals regardless of their educational background.

In January 1963, equal electoral right was granted to women by the Shah and this allowed them to enter the political arena of the country. Subsequently six women were elected as deputies to the national Assembly and the Senate. A few years later another woman, Farokhrou Parsa was appointed as the Minister of Education and thus inaugurated the path to

high official appointments to women.<sup>125</sup> It must be noted that with reference to this law, given that it was a reform from above, its meaning, in real terms, was limited. A component of the White Revolution, it was met with disapproval on the part of the reactionary religious leaders of the theological centre of Ghom. Khomeini was the leader of this group and on 15 Khordad 1342 (June 1963), massive demonstrations against the Shah's regime took place in Teheran and Ghom and other provinces. The religious leaders basically opposed land reform and the giving of voting rights to women because, from a religious perspective, private property was respectable and the intrusion of women in the political and social affairs something contrary to religious law. It is true that women's suffrage in a country where elections were not free did not mean much and that women usually followed their male partners in casting their votes, but the passage of this law at least meant that in the eyes of the law, women were equal to men. This was an important departure from the traditional view that saw women unequal and subordinate to men especially in political matters.

Other reforms of the White Revolution were also all imposed from above. However, the reforms regarding women were basically legal ones geared to push women into more political and social activities. The Suffrage Act which "granted" women the right to vote as equal citizens to men, to become elected and have the right to practise as law-makers in a way was the most important legal reform which had taken place to change the position of Iranian women up to that time. In spite of the opposition of the religious leaders to this Act, there was more support for it among the educated middle class population.

The Suffrage Act legally changed the political status of women but whether the majority of women participated in elections or not is not clear and as most women followed their husbands' political views, the



right to vote did not necessarily bring independent political decision-making in women. The other important factor is that in a developing country like Iran, giving voting rights to women does not bring women's participation in politics as much as it glorifies the international image of the developing country. In practical terms, the granting of the right to vote to women, in itself, did not mean much. The whole country was governed by a dictatorial system which did not allow free elections nor free participation in the political arena either, for men or women. Both the Act of Unveiling and Suffrage in Iran were felt to be necessities dictated by the economic expansion and the process of industrialisation and Westernisation and the expansion of the capitalist system, rather than a result of a conscious effort and pressure by women themselves. However, the important point here was the recognition of the equality of women with men in terms of the law. This was a turning point in women's history in Iran. The participation of women in the legal system as judges and magistrates influenced, and to some extent forced more legal reforms in favour of women. By 1967, the socio-economic development and the spread of education among women had created a new awareness and consciousness among the educated women of the middle and upper classes. The result of this consciousness and influence of women lawyers was a request for the reform of the Family Law. The Family Protection Act was the outcome of the direct influence of these women.

#### The Family Protection Act

In spite of all the efforts made through unveiling and the voting right, these laws did not much improve a woman's position and her rights within the family. In many cases these laws worked to the opposite by enforcing the contradictions within family life and society and contradictions between what was demanded by the law and what the

practised traditional norm of behaviour was. On the one hand, their legal status allowed women to become ministers and lawyers, yet on the other hand, they could not practise any right with regard to matters related to their own private lives as human beings. Their husbands could marry up to three more legal wives and have as many concubines and even worse, they could divorce them unexpectedly without their consent and take their children away from them. Within the family, they were unable to exercise any legal or political rights.

The Family Protection Court instituted by this law, evaluated cases in which a man and a woman wanted to separate from one another. The government took more active measures for supporting women by instituting a set of policies to protect women by providing financial and nutritional aid.

In this period, while inequality and injustice dominated the whole society, the implementation of these government policies they could not abolish sexual inequality completely. They had partial influence in raising women's social awareness in regard to women's status in family as well as society. Women's consciousness concerning social, political, and cultural matters and their own democratic rights increased. In spite of the flaws of the Family Protection Act, its most important consequence was the creation of the ideas of emancipation and equality for women and the justification of the demand for equal rights for women. However, this emancipation could not have had much meaning for many women in that it was not something that they had consciously struggled for. Given their own cultural educations and backgrounds, the final result, in terms of everyday life, sometimes took the form of a decline in moral standards and in an imitation of Western women, reflecting the values of such consumer societies. The process of Westernisation was not accompanied by mass education, social equality, and democracy. In fact, the obvious

result of it was high social inequality, political repression and dominant patterns of consumer society. Furthermore, the lack of understanding of this "freedom" was evident 20 years later when Iranian women, still in the midst of confusion, were prepared to return to tradition and to rely on the old and religious culture for their <sup>6</sup>emancipation. /

The Family Protection Law was the first set of laws which were directly related to the needs and welfare of the Iranian family and the position of women within it. This law was passed by parliament on 15 June 1967. The main issue within this law was the welfare of the woman within the family structure.

The Family Protection Law consisted of twenty-three articles and one note.<sup>14</sup> The first section (articles 1-5) deals with procedures over family conflict between the members of the family, as well as disputes over divorce. The second section (articles 6-7) deals with the duties of the arbitrators with regard to procedures to be taken before divorce. The jurisdiction of these matters, according to the law, should take place in the municipal courts and magistrates' courts, but the Sharia courts nevertheless continued to exercise jurisdiction over the disputes concerning marriage and divorce.<sup>15</sup>

According to Islamic law, the husband has absolute right to divorce his wife. The Family Protection Law required the couple to file a petition to the Family Protection Court to get a certificate of incompatibility. Articles 8-10 required the couple who wanted divorce to provide the court, with enough evidence to enable the court to issue a certificate of incompatibility. Article 11 specified that both husband and wife could apply for the certificate if:

1. Either of the spouses were imprisoned for five years or more.

2. The addiction of either of them to drugs, alcohol or gambling or other things that the court would decide were harmful to the spouse or the family.
3. The second marriage of the husband without the agreement of the wife.
4. Desertion of family.
5. If either of the spouses were convicted by the court for an offence which would be damaging to the honour of the family.

Article 17 says:

"The provisions of article II shall be inserted in the marriage document in the form of a condition of the contract of marriage, and an irrevocable power of attorney for the wife to execute a divorce will be explicitly provided."<sup>16</sup>

In this way the woman could divorce herself by having the power of attorney from her husband and this power was inserted in all marriage contracts. Once a woman had decided to get a divorce, she would have to get a certificate of incompatibility from the court. In order to leave room for reconciliation however, the certificate of incompatibility would be valid only for three months after it was issued. If the couple did not go to the divorce notary within three months, the certificate would lose its validity. Once the certificate was recognised by the notary, it became irrevocable.

Traditionally, according to Islamic law, a three month period of idda was observed after the divorce and during this period, a husband who had divorced his wife could "revoke" the divorce. The idda for a woman was three menstrual cycles and for a pregnant woman, until the delivery of the child. The woman maintained her right to her alimony, nafaghe during the three month period before divorce, but no provisions have been made for her beyond the three month period.

Article 12 states that the amount of nafaghe will be decided by the court. According to Islamic marriage, the woman is entitled to her bride

ance, mahr, and has the right to ask for it at any time. Traditionally, mahr is paid to the woman at the time of divorce as a form of financial security.

As previously mentioned, under traditional Islamic law, the mother could keep the custody of her children - sons under the age of two and daughters under the age of seven. After that, the father would be the custodian. According to article 12 of the Family Protection law, the parents decide the custody of the children between themselves and if they do not come to any agreement, then the court would decide for them.

Article 13 allows either of the parents or other relatives or the public prosecutor, to ask the court to change the custody of children.<sup>17</sup>

Article 14 deals with polygamy. It does not forbid it but it restricts it by stating that if a man wants to marry a second wife, he has to obtain the permission of the court and the court would give permission only if the man has the financial ability to maintain two wives equally. Before the court reaches a decision however, the first wife is informed. If she refuses her consent but the court grants permission for the second marriage, this would be a legitimate ground for her to file a petition for divorce.<sup>18</sup> The inconsistency between the law and cultural reality here was that the law was supposed to combat polygamy but all it did was to inform the wife of her husband's intention of a second marriage and to seek her consent. However, the woman, usually because of her economic dependence, as well as her cultural position, is unlikely to refuse her husband's second marriage. In other words, she was forced to consent rather than apply for a divorce. If a man married a second wife without the permission of the court, he would be sentenced to up to 2 years imprisonment and the marriage stayed afloat, moalagh, until the court reached a decision.

Article 15 states that a husband could complain to the court to prevent his wife from obtaining a job that he thought was against his family honour.

The Family Protection Law did not make provisions for temporary marriage, sighh. In this kind of marriage the duration as well as the bride price should be mentioned or the marriage is void.<sup>49</sup> The marriage is automatically dissolved at the end of the specified period. This kind of marriage does not require the usual process and ritual of a permanent marriage; it is easily arranged and culturally accepted. A man can have as many temporary wives as he pleases whereas a woman can only have one temporary husband at one time and she has to wait a period of 3 months or 2 menstrual cycles after her divorce from a permanent marriage before she can enter into another marriage contract. The children of a temporary registered marriage have the same rights and status as the other children. The children of an unregistered temporary marriage have no rights and are considered to have an illegal status.

The contradiction here is that, on the one hand, the Sharia and the Civil Code legitimises the sighh, and on the other, the Family Protection Law, by not making any provision for this, created a confusing situation where there was no traditional or legal solution.

Confusing situations between the Sharia and the Civil Law and other shortcomings of the Family Protection Law (discussed later) created confusion, lack of belief in the law and resentment among those affected by it. The Family Protection Law and earlier, the Unveiling Law, were both geared to provide new opportunities to middle class and upper class urban women. The opportunities given to women were used by them to achieve successful positions in public and in government sectors yet these legal changes were not very effective in breaking the traditional norms.

The Family Protection Law lifted the unconditional right of a man to divorce and made the divorce subject to the approval of the court. Men and women had equal right to apply for the certificate of incompatibility. Once the certificate of incompatibility was granted by the court, it could be presented to a notary public where official divorce would be registered.

However, in Iran, divorce, like marriage, is not just a civil action and according to Sharia, a mullah had to recite the appropriate passage in the Koran before the divorce is registered. This constructed one of the inadequacies of this law. Legally, only those documents which had been registered according to the provisions of the Ministry of Justice were considered official whereas there are cases where marriage or divorce are not officially registered but are accepted according to Sharia and therefore the community. According to the law, if one of the parties attempted to obtain a divorce without obtaining the permission of the court, that person as well as the official who registered the divorce in the notary public were liable to six months to a year imprisonment. The divorce itself, however, was not considered void. Therefore influential men could easily bribe a notary public and divorce their wives without the appeal to the court.

#### Labour Laws Concerning Women

Traditionally, Iranian women occupied low-status jobs. Women were mostly employed in rug-weaving, textile and spinning factories and factories making matches, glass, cardboard boxes, cotton cleaning and the like.<sup>20</sup>

The Industrialisation process increased the number of women working in low-level positions but did not change the traditional division of labour based on sex.<sup>21</sup> For example, the number of female workers in industry increased from 55 per cent in 1966 to 64 per cent in 1972<sup>22</sup> but

the majority still worked in low paid jobs in textile, food processing and packaging. Also the ratio of female workers was very low compared to male workers and non-working females. In 1956, only 9 per cent of women worked for pay. The ratio increased to 12 per cent in 1971,<sup>223</sup> but the number of professional women was much below professional men in 1974.

The process of industrialisation necessitated the passage of certain labour laws, some designed only for women. For example women workers, with the exception of nurses, were not allowed to work night shifts or perform any kind of work considered harmful to them. These laws were designed to protect women but in most cases, they resulted in discrimination against them. Occasionally, those women who could not work night shifts, were put in separate categories which often meant less pay.<sup>224</sup> The purpose of these laws was to keep the position of women within the family and make them available for their family members at night. The necessity of the fathers being available at night had obviously never occurred to the law-makers.

Organisations were obliged to pay the childbirth expenses of women workers and the wives of male workers. Pregnant women had a maternity leave of six weeks before and four weeks after the date of their childbirth. Their positions during this time had to be kept for them and their salaries paid. Women who breastfed their babies were allowed to feed them every three hours and institutions had to open a nursery if they had ten women with babies. The law was, however, very rarely enforced and very few organisations ever provided nurseries.

#### Shortcomings of the Reforms

Apart from the Suffrage Act, the Family Protection Act and the above mentioned labour laws concerning women, there were also other legal reforms aimed at improving the position of women. One such law was the issuing of a new passport law in 1976 which extended a husband's



permission for his wife to travel abroad from once to six years. However, like the Family Protection Laws, discussed above, this was also a compromise with the old rule rather than the complete elimination of the restrictive law.

The most radical of all legal reforms in Iran was the legalisation of abortion in 1977. Although women themselves had lobbied extensively for the passage of this law, abortion was legalised as part of a physicians' penal code and was performed only when a woman's health was in danger, rather than her having the choice.

The majority of discriminatory family laws affecting women were never changed. For example, Article 1059 of the Civil Code prohibited the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man. There is no such restriction on a Muslim man. Also the inheritance laws that differed greatly between men and women were left untouched.

There is a Sharia law that states that if a man finds his wife in a sexual act with another man, he has the right to injure or kill one or both of them and not be prosecuted. In the case of his daughter or his sister, he would be imprisoned for six months. This law, which was an invitation to crime against women, was never modified.

The Family Protection Law was insufficient and had a lot of drawbacks,<sup>25</sup> but it was, nevertheless, a major step for paving the way for eliminating the legal injustices existing in the Iranian society. The law did not gain acceptance at the national level at first, but information about it had reached most remote areas of the country,<sup>26</sup> and given time and opportunity, it could have benefited the entire female population in Iran.

An overall look at the Pahlavi period shows that women enjoyed a better position in legal terms. However, these changes were all imposed by the government and were not the result of a conscious demand on the

part of the majority of women and thus these "granted" rights were not enjoyed by the majority of them. In many cases these were mis-used or even neglected by both men and women. The Pahlavi regime since the Coup d'Etat of 1953, had raised the consciousness of middle class women by improving their educational and legal rights, but it nevertheless deprived them of any possibilities for promoting an independent and genuine women's movement. The small but significant wave of feminist activities and demands that had started with the Constitutional Revolution was taken over and turned into yet another instrument promoting the regime's image and influence. By so doing, the whole concept of women's emancipation was degenerated for the majority of the population who later identified it as another fad of the regime and a manifestation of its decadence and commitment to foreign culture.

#### The Anti-Shah Movements

In spite of all the legal rights given to Iranian women, the society continued to control her progress and to influence her through its moral precepts, customs, laws and religious beliefs. Women had to work to contribute to the income of the family as prices were rising and life was becoming more and more expensive. An important fact to consider is that in order to be integrated into the development efforts of the country, a woman had to have the means for self-improvement available to her. These means were available to her through the law imposed from above. She was pushing her way towards achieving equal opportunities in employment and education. In appearance, she was free, educated and emancipated but looking through this appearance, one could see that she was still looked upon as a mere sex object. She seemed to be pushing her way in a sophisticated manner through this, but that was only the appearance; her role was finally redefined and forced upon her by the Islamic Revolution of February 1979.

In the years following the opposition movements of 1963, a new shape developed in the movement, as in the absence of political parties, religious activities took the shape of political activities with the leadership of progressive clergy. The mosques became the centres for political debates and appeal to tradition seemed to emerge as the strongest force against the intrusion of the "imperialists". Great numbers of books were published on the progressive role of Islam as an ideology. Most prominent among these is Ali Shariati, whose book Fatima is Fatima was aimed at women (this is discussed later). This was an appeal to make them aware of their own identity as women and their role in the awakening of the society.

With the emergence of these Islamic revolutionaries who reinterpreted Islam with its political content and as a force against imperialism, women amongst other groups, were affected and started to become organised whilst backed with the force of Islamic ideology and tradition. These women, alongside men, attended the religious lectures organised in mosques, which would start with religious preaching but turn into a political discussion. These women formed an influential force by participating in the demonstrations and street fighting during the events of 1978 and 1979.

In all the anti-Shah mass movements of the late 1970s, women were seen everywhere, women of all ages and all kinds, mothers encouraging their sons and daughters whilst participating themselves. Younger mothers were active while holding children in their arms. The sick and wounded were nursed by the women nurses and doctors. Older women cooked meals for the wounded, sheltered them and took care of them in their houses as well as in the hospitals. Women relatives of political prisoners formed their own organisations to fight for the freedom of all political prisoners. Women participated in the strikes which paralysed

the economy and led to the downfall of the regime. And finally armed women, on the last days of the old regime, 10 and 11 February 1979, participated in the final downfall of the regime and the establishment of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

### Notes to Chapter 3

1. For a list of these organizations in the 1950s see Ruth Francis Woodsmall, Women and the New East, (Washington D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1960), pp.80-83.
2. Ibid. p.77.
3. Sazeman-e Zananeh Iran, Karnameh-ye Sazeman-e Zananeh Iran (The Report of the Women's Organisation of Iran) (Teheran: Sazeman-e Zananeh Iran, 2536/1977), pp.13-14.
4. Elizabeth Sanasarian, The Women's Rights Movement in Iran, (New York: Praeger) 1982, p.92.
5. Sirus Elahie, Motalehe-ye tatbihi-ye Vaz-e eqtesadi-ejtemai-ye Zananeh Shaqel dar Shahrha-ye Teheran, Qazvin, Kashan (Comparative study of the socio-economic condition of the working class women in the cities of Teheran, Qazvin, Kashan), (Teheran: Sazeman-e Zananeh Iran, 2536/1977) pp.7, 13. rep. in Sanasarian.
6. See Arasteh, 1970.
7. See Banani, 1961, p.68.
8. Ibid. p.69.
9. See Chapter 1 for more information on Ghoralol'ein.
10. See Banani, 1961.
11. See Manouchehrian, 1978, for detailed discussion of these inequalities.
12. See article 10 of the Constitution, Electoral Act.
13. This woman was executed by firing squad on charges of corruption and promoting prostitution after the Islamic Republic took over in 1979.
14. Hinchcliff, 1968.
15. Ibid, p.517, also Manouchehrian, 1978.
16. Hinchcliff, op.cit., p.519.
17. Ibid., p.520.
18. Article 11, clause C.
19. This form of marriage could last from one hour to ninety-nine years.
20. Woodsmall, Women and the New East, (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1960), p.72.

21. For a detailed study see Jacqueline Roudolph Toubia, Sex Role Differentiation in Iranian Families Living in Urban and Rural Areas of a Region Undergoing Planned Industrialisation in Iran (Arak Shahrستان), Journal of Marriage and the Family 37 (May 1975), p.437.
22. The Status of Women in Iran, (Teheran: Focus, 1977).
23. Iran Almanac, 1975, p.420.
24. Behnaz Pakizagi, "Legal and Social Position of Iranian Women", Beck & Keddie (eds.) Women in the Muslim World (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp.216-226.
25. See Manouchehrian, op.cit. for details.
26. Erika Friedl, "State Ideology and Village Women", Nash'at (ed.) Women and Revolution in Iran, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983), pp.217-231.

## Chapter 4

### THE AMBIGUOUS POSITION OF WOMEN IN ISLAM AND SHI'ISM

The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in February 1979. Iranian women had participated massively in all events that led to the downfall of the Imperial regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. They supported a revolution dominated by the Islamic ideology which in its turn restricted the advancement that women had made in promoting their own position and took away a few rights that women had gained and enjoyed under the previous regime in the last two decades.

The ambiguity of this could perhaps be understood through the experience of drastic socio-economic changes that took place during the previous two decades and the severe political repression of this period. The cultural conflict of the traditional classes led to a fall back on tradition and re-interpretation of Islamic concepts.

Following a very brief analysis of the cultural conflict due to economic development in recent years in Iran, this chapter consists of an analysis of the Koranic interpretations of women in Islam. It also looks at the contradictory position of women in the Shi'ite ideology dominant in Iran. We see both images of submissive as well as revolutionary women which are stressed according to the material demands of the society. This position of women in Islam and in Shi'ism, has given the ideologues of the Islamic Republic a special way of re-interpreting and manipulating the position of women in Iran. It is argued here that this ambiguity and duality of the female image has led to the inferior position of women within the Islamic Republic and this is evident by their legal position within the system.

## THE CULTURAL CONFLICT

### The Retreat towards Traditional Values

A consequence of the Pahlavi policies of development, Westernization, and the increasing economic prosperity in recent decades, was the emergence of a Western style middle-class bourgeoisie. This new class was gradually becoming alienated from the traditional culture and was imitating and identifying more and more with Western culture as a result of the introduction and adaptation of a modern Western style state administration introduced in the 1920s by Reza Shah.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional bourgeoisie of the bazaar whose cultural motives were rooted in the tradition of Islam and was developed into a national bourgeoisie, found themselves in conflict with the new situation.

A great number of the employed city women of the last two decades came from families in which women had already been integrated in the process of a modern developing state administration introduced by Reza Shah. The parents of this new generation were already professionals such as teachers, nurses, civil servants. The growth of employment opportunity for this new generation therefore came as an extension of their intellect and ability in skills.

However, many young female students and employers of this generation were becoming more and more socially aware as they were affected by the general political repression existing under the Shah's regime. It was women from this background who joined the activities of anti-State leftist organisations such as the Fadayan and other guerilla groups. The women of this layer later organised women's groups to fight for women's rights.<sup>2</sup> They joined political parties urging them to pay attention to women's issues. Among these women, there was a great number of those who had studied in Europe and America in the '60s and '70s. They had been influenced by the rise of the women's movement outside Iran.



The first generation of women to undergo the process of integration into a public life other than their traditional experience and to face the contradictions of the rapid social change came usually from traditional urban petty bourgeois families of merchants and craftsmen of the bazaar. These petty bourgeois traders who were also independent producers as well as distributors, were affected by the impact of industrialisation, specifically the rise of large-scale distribution networks and monopolies such as supermarkets. The impact of this process on their women was that the young women were forced to seek jobs and therefore higher education. As the state administration and social services were expanding, they were provided with ample opportunities to become teachers, nurses, civil servants.

Their experience of social change was very painful as they were the first generation undergoing the experience of adjustment with change. Often in the bazaar and among the traders' families, adherence to Islamic tradition and values was much stronger than in other strata. Women of this class had been brought up with a certain concept of themselves, what their role in society was, and what Islamic values and patterns of behaviour were. The wearing of the veil, of course, represented adherence to these values. What was more important than the wearing of the veil was the general segregation of the sexes and the seclusion of women and their confinement within the house. This class of urban petty-bourgeoisie is the strong base of Islamic ideology. However, these strong traditional concepts and values were questioned and came under attack as the young women of these families began to get higher education or jobs in government offices. Their surroundings were "alien" to them; there, women mixed with men, and not only were they unveiled, they followed latest Western fashion. These women were confused; they were between traditional and accepted family norms on the one hand, and the

pressure from the hostile environment on the other. In Tabari's words, "they could not be veiled at work, nor could they leave home unveiled."<sup>3</sup> These women therefore solved the problem by wearing a large scarf at university or at work. Under rapid social change, women of this class responded in different ways although always within an Islamic framework. Some tried to solve their confusion by modifying their traditional concepts yet some, perhaps the majority, fell back on the traditional concepts as a means of defending their own existence.

The difference between the reaction of these women with the professional women of the 1920s and 1930s, who were also under the impact of an abrupt change forced by Reza Shah's policies of modernisation, is that those women who were affected, were basically from the upper-middle classes and in general emerged from a social class which identified themselves with ideas that had emerged during the Constitutional Revolution. They were sympathisers of social progress and thought of European culture and politics as a model which would help Iran to overcome some of its problems of the time. Therefore the integration of that earlier generation of women was moulded into social life under the shadow of pro-western opinion which had filled the atmosphere.

By contrast the generation of the 1950s and 1960s of the professional women comes from the most traditional strata, the petty-bourgeoisie and the traders of the bazaar. The identification here is strongly with Islam. Over the previous two decades, under the drastic change, they began to seek an alternative in Islam to confront the harsh reality of the increasing integration of Iran in the world capitalist system. This is very concisely shown in Shariati's famous sentence, "The Shi'ite tradition in Islam began by saying 'no' to the course chosen by history. It was a revolt against history... This revolt against history made Shi'ism a religion of protest and martyrdom."<sup>4</sup> This ideological

framework gave the urban bourgeoisie the basis for its "revolt against history". These revolutionary ideas provided the framework of the response of Muslim women to change.

The first response was an attempt at a new interpretation of Islam. Shariati played a great role in the development of this new meaning of Islam. This is very much expressed in the movement of the Mojahedin Guerilla groups who were inspired by this new meaning of the Islamic ideology. The meaning of the chador for example for a woman Majahed had changed. The chador for her was not something which was required by Islam but it meant modest clothing.

Falling back on tradition for these women meant falling back on the interpretation of the position of women within the Islamic framework. In order to do this, the Koranic verses had to be re-interpreted as the Koran has always been the source. The contradictory position of women in the Koran, however, adds to the confusion over a progressive re-interpretation of the Koranic verses concerning women.

The Mojahedin, for example, were confronting many contradictions in their attitude towards the question of women's struggle and women's liberation. The basic problem for them was the fact that the source of their ideology was the Koran, and in order to keep this vital tie to Islam, they had to ignore the comments of the Koran about women, for example, the explicit statements of the Koran on the superiority of the rights of men over women discussed below. Faced with such issues which are expressed with no ambiguity in the Koran, Mojahedin simply decided to ignore them in their propaganda about women's rights, as these issues were so clearly stated in the Koran that there is no way to re-interpret them as has been possible with other issues.

The other response of the women caught in the acute social change was to fall back on tradition and on Islam as a means of defending their

existence against the process of change. The return to the wearing of the veil was a symbolic illustration of this return to the tradition. This was very dramatically shown in the women who intentionally had worn the veil during the large anti-Shah demonstrations.

## THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISLAM

### The Contradictory Position of Women in the Koran

Reviewing most data available on women's position in Islam reveals basically two opposing arguments. The first, sees Islam as responsible for the inferior position of women in Islamic countries. Those believing in this line of argument, always refer to the actual Koranic verses and the Hadith<sup>9</sup> concerning women.

The second argument views the position of women in Islam as higher than in any other religion. It argues that Islamic ideology is not against active participation of women in social and political activities. It blames the inferior position of women not on religion but on the conservative interpretation of the Islamic view on women. Those supporting this view always find explanations for discriminatory verses in the Koran on women and believe in the necessity of re-interpretation of it. This argument was very popular during the last years of the Pahlavi regime in Iran and was used by the opposition groups.

Whatever the line of argument on the position of women in Islam might be, one factor is always evident and that is the contradictory position of women in Islam and this has, in most cases, contributed to the down-grading and inferior position of women in Islamic communities. The Islamic view of woman's place in the social order is evident by the Koranic verses regarding the position of women.

The Koran refers to men and women being equal in the eyes of God, both being created from the same substance or from the union of the

sexes. Therefore this is seen as proof of Islam's equal treatment of women. However, the Koran has explicitly expressed the superiority of the rights of men over women. In the Soura WOMEN, men are asked to oversee the women's observance of the rules of the Koran. This shows the superior position given to men by the Koran in spite of both sexes being equal in the eyes of God. Man's authority over women is justified in the Koran by their being under the obligation of spending their wealth to maintain women.

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more [strength] than the other, and because they support them from their means... As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them [first, next] refuse to share their beds, [and last] beat them lightly.<sup>6</sup>

In the same Soura, polygamy and sexual relations with female slaves is encouraged:

Many women of your choice, two, or three, or four.<sup>7</sup>

If any of you have not the means wherewith to wed free believing women, they may wed believing girls from among those whom your right hands possess.<sup>8</sup>

Also in another part:

Your wives are as tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how you will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand.<sup>9</sup>

The Koran also has negative treatment of women when laws and regulations are concerned. For example, a woman is counted as half a man in financial and legal matters such as inheritance and as a witness. In some inheritance cases, such as when a woman inherits from her deceased husband, she is counted as one-eighth, and in a polygamous marriage as one-fourth of a man:

And get two witnesses, out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women, such as ye choose, for witnesses, so that if one of them errs, the other can remind her.<sup>10</sup>

God [thus] directs you as regards your children's [inheritance]; to the male, a portion equal to that of two females.<sup>11</sup>

### Community Practice and Discrimination

A different approach to the explanation of the status of women within Islamic structure is to say that women's position has been affected by both community practices and Islamic precepts. However, looking at the issue even from this perspective, again shows that the combination of community practices and Islamic precepts have also contributed to the inferior, rather than more equal, position of women.

Neither the Koran nor communities advocated equality of the sexes. The interpretation of Hadith helps legitimisation of many community practices. For example, there is no evidence of support in the Koran for child marriage but the legal age for a girl to marry is nine and child marriages are fairly common in Muslim communities. This is based on the argument that because Mohammad is said to have married one of his wives, Ayesha, when she was only nine, the practice of child marriage is therefore lawful.

Another community practice, mostly practised among the Shi'ite is sigheh, temporary marriage. The argument here is that the legitimisation of sigheh is to prevent prostitution. The roots of sigheh practices however are found in pre-Islamic tribal customs practised long before Mohammad in the Arabian peninsula. This practice went through many changes after Islam and eventually developed and was practised in its present way.<sup>12</sup>

Community discrimination against women is not specific to Islamic communities however. Cross-cultural studies of other religious communities show evidence of discrimination against women. Michael Fischer's study of traditional Zoroastrian, Jewish and Muslim communities shows similar criteria of marriage exchanges among them.<sup>13</sup> Zoroastrians, for example, claim that traditionally men and women have inherited equally, whereas in actual practice sisters receive half of the

portion of their brothers. Jews also do not give their daughters any right to inheritance, claiming that the dowry that is given to a girl is her portion of inheritance. Fischer sees the similarities of these practices as rooted in the ancient practices common among the Middle Eastern communities.

Fischer's study also shows similar codes of pollution rules for women practised among the Zoroastrians, Jews, and Muslims. Studies of Christian village communities have also shown not only similar codes of pollution for women, but existing stereotypes and attitudes towards women that are very similar to those practised among Muslim villagers.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the combination of religion of Islam and individual community practices have not contributed to the up-grading of the status of women in the society. While Islam advocated against negative practices of female child burial, most discriminatory practices were left untouched.

#### Equal but Different

The Islamic motto, "Equal but different", that Moslem women use with belief, is adopted from the Koranic treatment of the issue. The notion of equality is that men and women are both created from one substance, they are the same in the eyes of God, and whoever is a believer, regardless of gender, will enter paradise.<sup>15</sup>

Most Shi'ite interpreters of the Koran agree that women have been treated differently (not unequal though) in the Koranic verses, but their explanation is that this is because of the biological differences between the sexes. Men and women each have their own specific role in the creation. Therefore there is a biological division of labour.

In the verses which are concerned with religious and social activities of Muslims, all members of the community, whether male or female, are obliged to perform religious duties. However, women need special adjustments for the special biological activities of the female

tory, such as menstruation and child-bearing. During such periods, women are exempted from praying. On normal occasions also they should be covered (except for face and hands) while praying, and they cannot lead the prayers. On economic activities, both men and women can inherit property and conduct trade and use the income in whatever way they like. The law allows women to inherit half that of men, but they receive, at marriage, a sum of money called mahr which makes up for the loss of inheritance.

### THE CONCEPTION OF FEMININITY IN SHI'ISM

#### Re-interpretation of the Position of Women

In order to place the concept of being female within the structure of Shi'ism in recent years in Iran, one must inevitably look at the transformation of the ideology itself from a purely religious to a popular and political ideology. With the transformation of the ideology, the position of women within the framework of this ideology also was transformed. The imposition of the White Revolution perhaps was the beginning of the development of this transformation which finally gained the ability to mobilise the masses against the government in the Revolution of 1979.

The re-interpretation of the position of women during the last two decades prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, underwent changes which reflect the economic, social, and political events of this period. The shift was from a more orthodox view by Nouri to a more liberal and progressive interpretation by Motahari and Shariati. This in turn reflected the change in the position of women under the Pahlavi reforms. Islamic ideologues now had to re-consider their interpretations of the position of women in their appeal to recruit them into the opposition movement.



### Rationality versus Emotionality

The more orthodox position in terms of the Shi'ite ideology towards women is reflected in Nouri's book which was published immediately after the riots leading to the exile of Khomeini in 1963.<sup>16</sup> The general orthodox argument is that female instinct gives women the ability to bear the pain and burden of childbirth and this determines the psychology of women, making them more "emotional" in social life, as opposed to men who are naturally more "rational".<sup>17</sup> Man on the other hand, is physically stronger and biologically freer, therefore more fit for the struggles in social life, and to do so, he needs to be rational rather than emotional. This, in its simplest form, is reflected within the family structure where man is responsible for the welfare of the family, which requires more thoughtful planning and physical strength, whereas woman is responsible for domestic care which does not require rationality but emotion.<sup>18</sup> This is why, naturally and necessarily, women are equipped with emotion and men with reason.

Both Nouri and Motahari argue that men and women in Islamic law are treated with the same punishment if they commit theft or adultery. Some social activities, however, are specific to men. Such an activity, for example, is the participation in Jihad, holy war, against unbelievers, and holding positions such as judging. Nouri, who occupies a more orthodox position, rejects the participation of women in politics, saying that they should not be elected nor elect.<sup>19</sup>

### Women's Rights in Islam

Differences in biological functions are the basis of physical and therefore also psychological differences between the sexes. Both Nouri and Motahari argue this particular point. Their argument goes on to say that because of these differences, women's needs in life are different too, and thus both the rights and needs of women are different from those

of men, and women's rights should be given to them in a manner which suits their natural needs and this is what has been considered by Islam. The "real right" is the right which fits nature and the reality of the existence of the subject. Thus the conclusion is that because men and women are physically and psychologically unequal, the conception of "equal rights" can only worsen the position of women in society. Motahari goes further and argues that the demands for the rights of women were very much the demands of the Western capitalist societies.<sup>20</sup>

Motahari tries to evaluate the Western feminism and its demands within the framework of Western capitalist economy and the social and psychological context of Western society, and then prove that it is irrelevant to the position of women in an Islamic society. He argues that the capitalist system has given women economic independence only to use them as a cheap source of labour, and this is only in recent years, whereas granting economic independence to women was one of the first laws of Islam. Motahari also rejects the individualism of the West and argues that in Islam the right of the society has priority over individual rights. The declaration of human rights which calls for equality irrespective of sex, is therefore unacceptable in Islam. This declaration, he argues, mixes "equality" of rights with "similarity" of rights, and thus what women are struggling for is "similarity" of rights, not "equality" of rights. In Islam, on the other hand, men and women are part of the whole creation (each one is the necessary part of the other), and this fact is not prevalent in their "similarity of rights" but in their complementary position which they have towards each other (none of them have any advantage over the other; they are created from one substance, rather than, for example, women being created from man's rib as in Christianity), and women do not have an inferior position to that of men in Islam; their position is just different. This is the basis

for Muslim women viewing their own position as "equal but different" to that of men.

Motahari is of course defending the position of women in an ideal Islamic society, the "true Islam" which was practised at the time of the Prophet. He believes that this true Islam has been abused during the course of history and it is not practised as it should be. Shariati also has a similar argument. They both argue that the reality of Iranian society at the time, and the inferior position and treatment of women, are not Islamic practice and what is happening to women is not the result of the Islamic treatment of women.

This point is the basis for continuous arguments between pro-Islamic and anti-Islamic debates, and the Koran itself, which is the source, does not help to clarify the situation as it contains many incoherent and contradictory verses concerning women. The interpretation of these verses as well as the existence of different hadith also helps to further the confusion.

#### Islam and Feminism

The debate between the pro-Islamic and the feminists carries on without one group being able to convince the other. The pro-Islamics do not look at Islamic ideology as an ideology for inferiority of women and argue that the laws of Islam have not come from such ideology. On the contrary, they argue that women enjoy equal value.<sup>21</sup> They are not concerned about the question of why "equal but not similar" rights of both men and women place women in an inferior position. But feminists also direct their arguments using the same sort of preconception of equal rights. They talk in theory about equality of rights for both sexes, yet in practice they are faced with the fact that in their attempt to acquire such equality they also must fight for special rights for women, such as maternity leave from jobs and child care facilities which means asking

for different rights. Mottahari uses this contradiction to criticise the notion of "equal rights" and as a base for his argument on the dissimilar position of women with men.

However, both these arguments are similar in this way, that the Muslim ideologues look at the biological differences between man and woman, and on the basis of it, create unconditional inequality of rights between them. Feminism, on the other hand, sees the biological differences as irrelevant and creates social equality for both sexes, and on the basis of that, demands unconditional equality of rights for men and women. Modares argues that both concepts of "right" and "equality" are given and general, and thus feminism finds itself unable to win over the Islamic debate.<sup>22</sup> She further argues that both debates are similar and limited because of the fact that they both look at a given general position of men and women and conceptualise it in relation to their social and legal position. The fact that has been ignored here, she continues, is that women in their struggle have fought for both equality and inequality (depending on the context), and what has been constituted as their rights has been constituted within a particular political situation.

A general look at the arguments of Mottahari shows that his basic argument, like most other Shi'ite ideologues, revolves around his concern for the family and its relation to the civil society rather than the basic concern being woman herself. Women are discussed only insofar as their inferior position is a necessary condition for the separation of these two spheres. Thus Mottahari's concept of women's rights being "dissimilar but equal" definitely puts women into a subordinate position. The feminist demands for equal rights does not put women into an equal position either. This is what pro-Muslims use against feminism.

## Motahari on Women and Family

The "dissimilar" ways of treatment of the sexes by the Koran become apparent in the verses concerning the rights of male and female within the family. Motahari emphasises the differentiation between the "social" sphere and the family.<sup>22</sup> His argument is that all individuals enter the "civil society" which is made by man, in an equal position but gradually their acquired rights which are through their different characters and talents, make their position unequal. The "family" sphere on the other hand, is governed by "natural laws" and thus individuals are born in this sphere with different rights, abilities, and needs. In other words, they are put into dissimilar positions by the laws of nature. He then uses this as the basis for his argument on the necessity of hajib.

According to Motahari, men and women occupy different positions within the family and therefore they have different rights. These rights concern starting a marriage, living within a marriage, and ending a marriage, and are presented as:

- The man is the head of the family and is responsible for the maintenance of the woman and his children. In return the woman has moral and maintenance responsibility.
- Under certain conditions, men are allowed to marry as many as four wives, and as many temporary wives. But women can have one husband at a time.
- The right of divorce is that of man's but it is conditional. Women also can ask for divorce under certain conditions although this is not in accordance with "natural law".
- Custody of children is the right of man. The woman can have the custody of children only up to a certain age.
- A man can re-marry immediately after divorce but a woman has to

wait a period of time known as ʿiddah which is four months and ten days or three menstruation periods in the case of permanent marriage, and three months after a temporary marriage.

- A woman inherits half that of a man.

There are two bases for the difference of "rights" in all these stages of family life mentioned by both Nouri and Motahari. The first is the dichotomy rationality=man/emotionality=woman. The second reason is related to the particular conception of female sexual instinct and the regulations for its control. Nouri argues that woman's emotionality is shown through her biology, which makes her unable to have reason; for example the smaller size of her body, her brain, her heart, and the weakness of her five senses in general.<sup>24</sup> Motahari, though, gets the help of "empirical behaviour" of women to show their emotionality. He argues that both men and women have the same structure for their intelligence and talent but women's action is dominated by their emotion. To support his argument, he brings examples of female behaviour in everyday life within the family and society in general. He brings examples of both Islamic and Western societies to show that women are desperately in need of love and in their relations with men they seek love rather than sex, they get excited easily, become jealous much more easily than men, and they change their mind very easily.

The general argument, then, is that because of this emotionality, women have been prohibited from participating in the holy war and judgement. In the view of Motahari, the "right" of society here is being protected against the "right" of women in participating in social activity. The Koranic emphasis on the necessity of mahr and the consent of the father in marriage, he argues, is set on the same basis. Women have learned to make up for their physical weaknesses by making themselves more difficult for men to reach. He thus sees the mahr as

a present for woman rather than a price. It is an arrangement that takes care of woman's emotional need. His argument is that if the Koran had considered only the economic aspects of *mahr*, it would abolish it and instead would give the same inheritance right to women. He also argues that when a young virgin girl is married she can easily be deceived because of her lack of experience, and thus the consent of the father is for her own support and not a reason for her inferiority of intelligence.

On divorce, Motahari argues that divorce also derives its law from nature. The right of divorce belongs to man but there should not be unconditional use of it for man. Under certain conditions, women can ask for divorce but, he believes, there could be other ways of creating a balance in the relationship without taking the natural right of the man. This can be done, he argues, by putting conditions in the marriage contract and mentioning circumstances under which a woman could ask for divorce.

The sexual activities of men and women, according to Motahari, are the basis for the different treatment of men and women by the Koran. All sexual activities between the sexes belong to the sphere of "family" whereas all other activities, such as economic, social, and cultural, belong to the sphere of "civil society". Islamic law, he argues, is concerned with keeping each activity within its relevant space as the mixing of the two spaces would create chaos in the society. He believes that the difficulties that Western society is faced with, all stem from the moving of sexual activity from the private family sphere into civil society and its mixing with social activities. The mixing of these two spheres inevitably creates the act of *zina*, which is sexual activity between unmarried people. Motahari's argument, however, does not emphasise the separation of the public sphere from the private sphere but his emphasis is on the separation of the activities of the two spheres.

Motahari argues that in Islam sexual power of women is considered stronger but the balance is created because women are more capable of controlling their sexual urge as they are in constant search for love. Islam recognises female sexuality and acknowledges its need to be satisfied; sexual activity (within the legal framework of marriage) is not considered a sin. Female sexuality should be satisfied and the importance of this is seen in the law that a woman can demand a divorce if she is not sexually satisfied by her husband. His argument is that women should be satisfied both sexually and emotionally in the family sphere so that they would not seek such satisfaction in the social sphere of the society. Motherhood which is the natural task of a woman, makes the home the natural place for her activities. However, her social and economic activities, he warns, should not be denied to her. He even argues that some particular social jobs such as nursing, medical practice, and teaching should be considered social obligations for women because their participation in these jobs helps the separation of the activities of the two spheres by preventing direct and close interaction of the sexes within the wider society. In general, women are not prevented from occupying other jobs and participating in activities, provided they keep their hejab and avoid a close interaction with the opposite sex.

Hejab in Motahari's view is an important part of a series of ways created to preserve the separation of the "family" sphere for the "civil society". Hejab is a device which women are specifically asked to observe by Motahari. By the same token, he asks men to have "modest looking" and avoid directly looking at a woman unless they have in mind to marry her.

The other advice used by Motahari for the preservation of the division of the spaces is polygamy and muta - temporary marriage. He



argues that the "natural" form of marriage is monogamy but there are three factors for the creation and practice of polygamy - economic necessity, biological necessity, and the higher number of females in the population. The economic and biological factors, he argues, are justifiable for the practice of polygamy only under specific conditions. The greater number of females in the world population, however, as he argues, creates a "right" for women and a "social duty" for men, as it is the natural right of all women to marry and as their number is more than men, the society should provide a solution in the form of practical law for them to obtain their "right". However, he argues that since love and emotion cannot be satisfied in polygamy, as in monogamy, there are difficult conditions set up for the practice of polygamy and if these conditions are not observed, it is individuals who should be blamed and not the Islamic law.

On temporary marriage, Motahari very progressively argues that this device is only for satisfaction of sexual needs, however, there should be certain conditions set up for its practice. He considers the practice of Muta acceptable only for the unmarried as conditions of modern life require late marriages, temporary marriage would be a device to help prevent zina. He asks for its prohibition for married men though.

The argument on the right of the father over child custody is that it would leave women free to get married again and thus would prevent them from experiencing sexual frustration and committing zina.

#### Shariati on Women

The conception of "woman" in the writings of Shariati cannot be analysed without putting it within his wider political and religious perspective. Shariati's ideas became popular through a series of lectures he gave in Hosseini Ershad, a theological college in Tehran. These lectures, published in the form of pamphlets, very soon gained

popularity and became central to the open ideological opposition to the Shah's rule throughout the country in the first half of the 1970s. His teachings were concerned with a "classless divine society" which would be possible through Shi'ite struggle both with religious reactions on the one hand and imperialism on the other.<sup>25</sup>

Although Shariati criticises the effect of imperialism, he nevertheless believes that the third world societies have to be inevitably affected by Western modernisation and thus the total rejection of modernisation by some religious leaders is unacceptable and a form of reactionary fanaticism. His argument is that changes should be accepted but the only way by which the young would be saved from the corruptive effect of the diffusion of the Western values is to accept only the relevant values into the system. He criticises very sharply the kind of vulgar Westernization that was expanding in Iran and his fight against it comes in the form of his efforts to construct "real Shi'ism" and for this, he tries to re-interpret principles of Shi'ism and demonstrate how these principles have been diverted from their right way through different historical events and have become apolitical and neutral and thus ineffective or reactionary. He believes the most important of these historical events is the development of Shi'ism as the state religion under the Safavid in the seventeenth century and this event neutralised the role of the clergy.<sup>26</sup> Because of this event, he argues, the work of the clergy was more concentrated on the theology rather than their involvement in politics and this changed the form of Shi'ism and "emptied" it from its political content and thus the political message was faded in the empty form that had developed as Shi'ism; isolated from the real everyday social affairs.<sup>27</sup> At the same time though, Shariati considers the blind imitation of the West, or what he calls "cultural imperialism" as the great human conspiracy. The aim and the conspiracy

of this "cultural imperialism" is to alienate the third world countries from their traditional cultural values and character and in this way make them passive and unable to resist the imperialist attempts at economic exploitation.

Shariati's picture of woman is portrayed in relation to his general view of exploitation of the third world countries, including Iran, by "cultural imperialism". For him, as for Motahari, woman is the centre point of the family and thus she is the perfect target for the imperialist. He shares this idea with Fanon who believed that the French could manipulate Algerian society only when they manipulated the women of that society. The manipulator of women turns them into "Western dolls". The Western conspirator exports "...freedom, ethnic, technique, culture, art, and pornography, to this eager and hungry society because he wants the raw material and the control of natural resources and this is the basic motive for the deal."<sup>29</sup> The imperialist is very generous in exporting this, he argues, and the mass media as well as the political institutions are all at his service and for its expansion.

Shariati considers the image of woman created by capitalists as having two functions. First she is a sex object and as such a threat to the concentration and the waste of energy of the working people and the intellectual, as she diverts their attention from the real struggle against capitalism and class. Her second function is that she is an apparatus in the hands of capitalism, which makes her a "one dimensional being" who has nothing to offer but her sexuality for encouraging consumerism and to create more dependant people and more production. In this way "love" was replaced by sexuality and woman who was the source of inspiration in the tradition, is transferred to a sexual image and the means for transformation of the values of a traditional and spiritual society to the values of an empty, consumer society. This ethic of

capitalism is spread much easier in the East as it creates a generation of young people caught in the war between the fanatical reactionaries and the "ultra moderns". Without any guidance, they become alienated with their "selves", one dimensional consumers with no mind of their own.<sup>27</sup>

Women in the Islamic countries, according to Shariati, play an important role in preserving the traditional social and cultural relations and thus they are also the important factor in the consumption of the society. As women are sensitive beings, they are the first who would be affected and would accept the "new civilisation" especially when their own society puts them in a trapped position of being exploited and maltreated under the name of tradition and religion. A woman benefits the least from human rights and her abilities are never given space to develop, they are reduced to function as a "washing machine" and her own being to a "breeding machine". It is at this stage that he again criticises the idea of those traditional Muslims who consider the changes and evolutions of the present day society, which at least up to a certain limited extent draws women to social life, as destructive, decadent, and against the Islamic principle, arguing that the reaction of this sort of Islam towards all the changes of the society is that it calls them haram. In this way all the rights that are given to women by Islam are being taken from them in the name of Islam. He suggests that those strugglers who consider Islam as the ideology for their struggle, Maktabe Mobarezati, should oppose this sort of confrontation with the position of women in the society. Shariati being the most important thinker and lecturer of this school, expresses very harshly his opposition to this sort of Islam. In one place he says:

If a woman of today changes colour violently and makes herself a doll...we ought to look at the foreign economic imperialism on the other side of the border, and on this side, we must look at ourselves who have helped it [to happen]. We have made her run away and they caught her very easily. We call her weak, paralysed, slave of husband, mother of children...and even "impoliteness", "house",

and "goat" ...and we have separated her creation from that of man and we are in doubt whether a woman should learn how to write or not? And we rationalise this by saying that if she could write she would write letters to Namahran... We consider her as a savage animal who cannot be tamed or trained and therefore the only way of keeping her is to put her in a cage thinking that if the door of the house is left open, she would escape and get lost. Her chastity is like a dew which evaporates the moment it sees the sun. Woman has been like a prisoner who had no way to school nor to the library nor to the society.<sup>20</sup>

Shariati goes on to say that although in Islam the pursuit of knowledge is a necessity for both men and women, women have been deprived of this and their social activities reduced to crying at the suffering of Hossein and his family in the rozeh. They are trapped in superstitious beliefs. They cannot be expected to be loyal when all they are asked is to produce "tears" in rozeh and "children" in the family. In this sort of corrupted and traditional society where a woman is alienated from her own religion, she would, of course, be degraded even in her role within the family life and this degradation accounts for her attraction to the absurdity of the consumerism. He again, using Fanon's argument in Algeria, holds Iranian men responsible if Iranian women positively respond to the murmurs of the imperialist for their "lost rights". Iranians, he argues, are responsible if Reza Shah became the champion of women's liberation while his real intention was to keep their minds from the thought of real freedom and to open a market for European cosmetics and other feminine goods. In this way, that is in order for the construction of the consumer market, he argues, the character of people had to be changed and the history and tradition destroyed. The best way to do this was to influence women who directly influence the social relations, the next generation, the cultural values and attitudes of the society. Women thus become trapped and confused. On the one hand, if they refuse to join the "new civilisation", their traditional life does not offer them anything but exploitation and injustice. On the other, if they reject the tradition and superstition, there is no other way but to

become trapped in consumerism.

Shariati's criticism of the traditional reactionary treatment of Islam then rests upon the idea that putting unjust limitations on women's life first of all is not an effective way of struggling against the unpleasant changes of a society; on the contrary, it has its negative effect. He believes that for a majority of women, that form of traditional heritage, and the traditional oppressive form, is no longer acceptable nor bearable. Secondly, this kind of traditional woman in general, would be unable to play her role the way she is expected to; an illiterate woman cannot bring up intelligent children. A woman whose religion is based on a blind belief and superstition, can never bring up children who could benefit from a real belief in their religion. A woman who has learnt gossip instead of literacy, cooking instead of scientific and intellectual amusement, superstition and tradition instead of knowledge and reading books, can never be a good partner for her husband either.

Shariati's evaluation comes to the conclusion that neither that sort of traditional framework is useful for women nor this sort of imported framework and value. A woman in Iranian society, he believes, should built up her personality and identity while having in mind the "history, <sup>✓</sup> culture, religion and a society which has got its spirit and its capital from Islam" and her ideal symbol should be Fatima, the daughter of Mohammad who was both an ideal daughter for her father and an ideal wife for Ali as well as a good mother for her children, Hassan, Hossein, and Zeinab and most important, she was a being worthy of herself.<sup>21</sup> A Shi'ite Iranian woman of today, he proposes, should construct her personality in accordance with the conditions of an Islamic society and with the duties appointed to her in such a society.

In his book Fatima is Fatima, Shariati talks about three kinds of

women: the traditional woman who accepts the traditional framework without question, the woman who has accepted the new imported values and has solved the question for herself in this way, and the third woman who neither accepts that nor this, she is confused as to which model to follow. The third group of women is what Shariati is most concerned with. He puts the model of Fatima in front of such a woman.

In his attempt to construct this model, Shariati reconstructs the whole life of Fatima praising her social ideal qualities and emphasising the special attention Mohammad had in training her through suffering, poverty, and harsh treatment of her, whereas she was his ideal and respected daughter at the same time. Mohammad had expressed respect and admiration for her on many occasions yet although she was so admired and loved, she had to live a very poor and harsh life while her sisters married rich men and had comfortable lives. She married Ali and was an ideal wife for him, sharing in all the hardships with patience. Her role here is crucial as Mohammad did not have any sons and Ali was the only male progeny for him, thus Fatima is the link to the male descendants and this puts her in the place of a son as well. At the same time she is the female ancestor of the twelve Imams. After the death of the Prophet she played, with Ali, an active role in keeping Islamic justice. Immediately after the death of the Prophet, Ali was put aside and became isolated but it was Fatima who confronted Abu Bakr in her effort to fulfil the Prophet's will, that is the succession of Ali to Caliphate. She did this in the form of political and religious debates with Abu Bakr and thus showed her devotion to Islam as well as her abilities and powers of resistance to the unjust treatment of Islam.

Shariati's argument is that Fatima is the real conception of a woman in Islam. She is ideal in all the dimensions expected of a woman in an Islamic society: she is an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, an ideal

mother, and an ideal, responsible and militant woman for the Islamic society. However, Shariati concludes the book by saying that Fatima cannot be seen as each of these roles in isolation or in relation to other people as she is all of this but at the same time she is herself and thus there is no metaphor for Fatima so he just says "Fatima is Fatima", that is, her identity comes from herself.

Shariati believes that the young and the women are two groups most affected and most disillusioned by the traditional and reactionary Shi'ism, so in his opposition to the "cultural imperialism", he tries most to attract these two groups. The image of woman created by him differs from the one created by more orthodox ideologues such as Mousavi and Motahari in the fact that although he still looks at women only within the family life, he points to and emphasises the liability on a woman to "construct" and "create" herself if she had a model of guidance. He seems to be the only ideologue who looks at a woman as being responsible for the society, so he constructs the model as a woman who has her own identity and not just that of her father, husband, or son. In no way does he attempt to separate the family from the society as others do, but considers it as the basic unit of the society in a sociological sense (not natural) and thus sees its function operating through social mechanisms. He rejects the fanatical and the endless interpretations on its legal and social position. For example, taking about the hejab, he does not go through lengthy discussion as to how women should wear it or whether their hands and faces should or should not be shown, but he considers its moderate observation could operate against the values and interests of a consumer society which is obsessed with sex.

It was through these sorts of reinterpretations that Shariati could attract millions of young people and thus transfer a religious discourse



from a passive position to a very popular political ideology. His conceptualization of the principles of Islam brings doubt to the reactionary dimension of religion which has so far been used by different groups, especially Marxists, to attack religion in general.

All these arguments should be viewed within the context and the political situation in Iran. For example, the emphasis put by Khomeini and others on the obedience and purity of daughters, and wives and mothers, cannot be seen in isolation as it reflects the moral opposition launched by the orthodox and isolated clergy in the 1960s against the Shah's policies of the White Revolution. On the contrary, as we move towards the present time, there is more concern about changing such a silence and obedience more and more into the social context. This is done by Khomeini and Shariati. Thus, in contrast to the ideal submissive woman of the orthodox books, Khomeini draws attention to arguments on the emotional and sexual satisfaction of both partners in the ideal family. His opposition to the consumerism of the society and to the regime was shown in his concern to defend the family from imitating the West. And Shariati, the most important and popular figure in the movement, set up a progressive argument within the framework of Islam, specifically aiming at the young, and especially women, while launching attacks on the Western cultural imperialism.

#### Shi'ite Female Role Models

After the death of Prophet Mohammad, there was a split amongst his followers over election of a successor. According to Shi'ite accounts, leadership of the Muslim community was to pass to Ali, Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law, as Mohammad had chosen him on one occasion as his successor. In spite of Ali's right however, Abu Bakr, a father-in-law of Mohammad, became the first Khalif of the Muslim community. Followers of Ali became known as the Shi'ites.

Ali had wanted to swear allegiance with Abu Bakr and his successor, Umar, in the interests of the community but each time Fatima, his wife had opposed any break to his father's injunction that saw Ali as the first Khalif. Fatima also challenged publicly the judgment of Abu Bakr in not allowing her to inherit the gardens of Fadak that were part of Muhammad's property. Abu Bakr had judged that these gardens were not Muhammad's private property but were held by him in trust for the community.

It was only after the assassination of the third Khalif Othman, whose rule had created conflict among the Muslims, that Ali was elected as the fourth Khalif. By then the conflicts amongst Muslims had increased so much that Ali's rule was mostly spent in fighting to create order and defend Islamic principles. In order to create a stronger hold for himself, Ali moved the Islamic capital from Medina to Kufa where he enjoyed greater support. However, Ali was assassinated a few years later.

After Ali's martyrdom, Mu'awia, the governor of Syria became the Kalif and ruled for two decades. Although there had been an understanding that after Mu'awia's death, the Khalifate would revert back to the descendants of Muhammad, Mu'awia's son Yazid succeeded to power. Hossein, Ali's son refused to swear allegiance to him and decided to lead a revolt against him. Foreseeing his martyrdom however, Hossein released his followers from any obligation to him and with his family set off for Kufa. Seventy-two loyal men followed him. They faced Yazid's army and were forced to camp on the desert of Karbala on the first of Moharram 61 A.H. The events of that month, with its climax, the martyrdom of Hossein on the tenth day, make the Passion of Karbala and are recalled every year by the Shi'ite through various processions and commemorations.

All the male members of Hossein's camp, with the exception of his son Zein al-Abedin who had been very ill, and his four year old son, were killed. The rest of the camp members, all women and children were taken captive and were taken to Yazid's court.

The story of Karbala here enters a different phase in which Zeinab, Ali's daughter and Hossein's sister, plays an important role. Zeinab had left her husband to take part in her brother's fight against injustice and defence of Islam. She had taken charge of the women and children of the camp. After the massacre of the men of the camp, she managed to protect the sick Zein al-Abedin. This act by itself was very important. The survival of Zein al-Abedin ensured the line of the descendants of the Prophet and Ali and the continuation of Imamah (leadership) of the Shi'ite community.

Zeinab is considered to be a very brave woman. She is called the Shir\_zan, lion woman, of Karbala. When the captives of the camp were taken to the court of Yazid, on their way, when they passed cities and communities, Zeinab informed the local population of the event, the identity of the captives and the tyranny and injustice that was done to the family of the Prophet. She held sermons and scorned those who did not help Hossein's cause against the tyranny and corruption of Yazid's rule. Zeinab was a gifted orator and a woman of tremendous courage. Her incredible defiance in the face of the oppression has been instrumental in informing Muslims about the events of Karbala and thus keeping the cause of Shi'ite alive. Her most significant sermon was in the court of Yazid when she obtained permission from Yazid to take the survivors of the camp, including Zein al-Abedin back to Medina.

Hossein was the hero of Karbala and Zeinab was the heroine, equally significant in perpetuating the Shi'ite cause. She was brave, militant, political and most important, she was devoted to the cause of Shi'ism.

Here she portrays one side of the dual image of the ideal Shi'ite woman. The other side is portrayed by Fatima's character. Fatima was a loyal and devoted wife and mother, tolerant and sacrificial and above all very modest, Hajigub. Fatima's image dominates the Shi'ite woman. Many rituals among women, commemorate her memory. In particular, the Shafrahye Hazrat-e Fatemeh, a women's religious party held at home in fulfilment of an oath, is very common among Shi'ite women.

With the upsurge of the revolution in Iran however, for a time, the image of Zeinab became the more emphasised image of the ideal revolutionary Shi'ite woman. She became the model for many revolutionary women covered in the chador marching angrily in the streets in protest against the "corrupt" and "tyrant" rule of the Shah. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, these women were seen as armed guards, bearing machine guns. The words Komandoha-ye Hazrat-e Zeinab, the Commandos of Zeinab, were later used to refer to women in military training. One major women's magazine, Etelaat-e Danovan, was renamed Rah-e Zeinab, the Path of Zeinab.

This emphasis on the revolutionary character of Zeinab did not mean that the image of Fatima was in any way dimmed. This image is always encouraged. As mentioned, Shariati expands Fatima's character and proposes her image as the model for Iranian Shi'ite woman. At the beginning of the revolution, a more active and militant model for Iranian women was needed so the image of Zeinab came to the forefront. However, as economic crisis started, the ideal image of Fatima as wife and mother was emphasised again. For example, with the increase in unemployment figures, women were encouraged more towards domestic activities, therefore the more passive image of Fatima rather than the militant image of Zeinab was emphasised.

## Retreat into the Tradition of Islam

In the course of a few decades in Iran, we saw an evolutionary progress in the Islamic ideology concerning women: a progress from orthodox views to more moderate and progressive views of the position of women in society through the new interpretation by popular Islamic ideologies.

What was attractive to Iranian women with different social backgrounds was the variety about the conceptualisation of women in Shi'ism which offered them a variety of interpretations and thus was adjustable to their own different conceptions and experiences. This is what the feminists have not been able to offer Iranian women.

This retreat into the tradition of Islam provided middle-class Muslim Iranian women, for the first time going out to work and confronting the hostile world outside the protected sphere of family life and home, with immediate answers to three problems. The first and most obvious was a way of resisting the penetration of the outside world while at the same time being drawn into its sphere. The second was that it provided a very distinctive positive identity for Muslim women. Finally, it provided a different conception of what her "emancipation" meant for her as opposed to other images projected by secular, political modes so she returned to the traditional Islamic image to find her identity.

For Muslim women the resistance to the outside world expressed by wearing the veil and returning to Islamic values was at first merely a defensive attitude. Later a political dimension developed around it. In addition to political repression and State control, the introduction of new concepts of consumerism and the development of the new images for "modern consumer woman" occurred. To choose to remain veiled for women was a way of rejecting this. Yet this was not just a negative response to the developing change, it at the same time encourages the traditional

image of women advocated by Islam and against the rising image of "modern woman" which was interpreted as another sign of the destruction of Islamic culture and values by the Shah and Western imperialism. Therefore this retreat into the tradition of Islam was not seen as a retreat to the past but a positive development for the future.

These Muslim women, in their retreat to the tradition, had to even reject the "equality" demanded by some feminist women who raised the question of legal and social equality for women, further integration of women into all professions, demanding child-care facilities and other feminist issues. They had to reject this and look at their "emancipation" through Islam. Their argument was that women were different from men in terms of biology, psychology, and intelligence, and it would therefore be unjust to ask for equality for unequal beings.

The Shi'ite images of women were here taken as models. Zeinab was seen both as a brave woman who stood by her brother Hossein in the battle of Karbala, while in peacetime, she fulfilled her duties and responsibilities as wife and mother, raising and training the new generation of Muslim men.

In this way, the militancy of women in their participation in the struggles against the Shah and their later involvement in the reconstruction battle, Jahsde Sazandegi, did not necessarily conflict with their traditional seclusion and their role as mother, wife, and daughter. The ambiguous position of women within the Islamic framework makes the limits of the role and responsibilities of a woman vis-a-vis the society very wide and varied and a woman can have different roles in different times. This is shown by the fact that the Islamic Republic Constitution establishes motherhood as the primary responsibility of a woman yet at the same time women receive military training to fight on the borders to defend Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

#### Notes to Chapter 4

1. This has been described in more detail in Chapter 2.
2. For more details refer to Chapters 3 & 4.
3. Azar Tabari, "Enigma of the Veiled Iranian Woman", Feminist Review, No.3, 1980, p.25.
4. Ali Shariati, Mas'oubiyate Shi'a Boudan, (The Responsibility of being a Shi'ite), (Pamphlet: n.p., n.d.).
5. Hadith is the account of Mohammad's sayings and action. It also covers what was done in his presence and was approved or not forbidden by him.
6. Abdullay Yusuf Ali (trans.) The Holy Qur'an (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1975), Sura "Women", Section 6, Verse 34, p.190.
7. Ibid., Sura "Women", Section 1, Verse 3, p.179.
8. Ibid., Sura "Women", Section 4, Verse 25, p.187.
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15. The Holy Qur'an, Sura 4, Verses 2 and 124.
16. Yahya Nouri, Women's Rights in Islam and the World, (Tehran: 1964).
17. Ibid. Also Motahari Nezame Hojroughe zan Dar Eslam, (Women's Rights in Islam). (Ghom: Sadra, 1357/1978).
18. This is discussed also later in Motahari's view on the family.
19. Ibid.

20. Motahhari's views were reflected in a series of articles published in response to the demands for equality of women with men by Zane Kook, a woman's magazine run by a group of middle class women who, while concerning veiling, polygamy, divorce laws and temporary marriage, saw the inequality of rights between the sexes as the sign of inferiority of women in Islam. They also admired the Bahavi attempts to change the position of woman towards the model of a European woman. Motahhari's articles were later published as a book under the title The Question of the Veil which is the source or reference here.
21. This is, of course, contradictory to the Koran which points to the superiority of men. However, Motahhari's argument over this issue is that there is a different approach in the Koran on the issue of "value" concerning the inferior or superior position of an individual and "right" which is the individual's duty towards the society and social life. Thus in the Koran, there are verses concerning the equal creation of the sexes in the face of God and others which are concerned with different rights for them towards their society and that is a separate matter to their being equal as creations by God.
22. Mina Modares, "Women and Shi'ism in Iran"; IE, double issue 5/6, 1981.
23. Morteza Motahhari, Nezame Hoqhough-e Zan Dar Eslam (The System of Women's Rights in Islam), (Qom: Sadra, 1353/1974).
24. Yahya Nouri, op.cit.
25. Ali Shariati, The Sociology of Islam, translated by H. Algar, (Berkeley: Misan Press, 1979).
26. Ali Shariati, Tashayo'e Alavi, Tashayo'e Safavi (Alavid Shi'ism, Safavid Shi'ism), (Pamphlet: n.p., n.d.).
27. Ibid.
28. Ali Shariati, Fatemeh Fatemeh Ast (Fatima is Fatima), (m.p., 1350/1971).
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30. Ibid. p.78.
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## Chapter 5

### THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, marked the beginning of the development of a theocratic government in Iran. Its Cultural Revolution and the process of Islamisation revolved around the suppression of women and this hindered the development of the women's rights movement once again. While the Pahlavis were criticised for their lack of interest in the development of a genuine women's movement in Iran, religious revivalism, the core of the Islamic Republic, together with obsession with female sexuality and its control, has totally repressed the female sex.

This chapter conducts a brief discussion of the events immediately following the revolution during a period known as the Spring of Freedom, Bahara Azadi and subsequent legal and cultural reforms during the process of Islamisation and women's place in the structure of the Islamic Republic. This will serve as a background to the growth of the post-revolutionary women's rights movement which is discussed in the following chapter.

#### THE SPRING OF FREEDOM

By 12 February 1979, the revolutionary movement had reached its peak when the army barracks, SAVAK and police buildings were taken over by the people. As a consequence, in the days following the insurrection, many young people who had broken into the barracks with the crowd, armed themselves with weapons taken from there and local street committees were formed. These committees recruited young people of different backgrounds and ideologies as they were all ready to defend their revolution. These were trained as revolutionary guards, Pasdaran'e Enghelab and were assigned on guard duty and other tasks controlling the streets.

Large numbers of women participated in the insurrection either

directly fighting behind the street barricades or indirectly as back-up and morale forces, delivering food and medicine for the fighting men and the wounded. But the number of women who participated as revolutionary guards on duty was very small.

The popular takeover of power by the revolutionaries meant that at this time all the forces in opposition to the Shah's government, previously underground, such as the two major guerilla groups of Fadayan-e Khalq and Mojahedin-e Khalq, were able to come to the forefront, establish themselves openly and gain popular support.

The post revolutionary environment had created an atmosphere of freedom and democracy where various political groups with different ideologies began their free activities. All sorts of periodicals and books were published and sold openly in the market. Different issues were addressed in these publications and different views on the new government were expressed.

After the severe political repressions experienced during the Pahlavi era, this revolutionary ferment was very exciting to various strata of the Iranian population and that included women. It was in the midst of this atmosphere that various groups of women came together to celebrate the International Women's Day, which had been banned for many years, on 8 March 1979. It should be noted here that great numbers of women, many of them with leftist ideology, had returned to Iran to participate in the revolution and post-revolutionary activities. They were influential in organising this one-day celebration, which ended up becoming a five-day demonstration of women demanding their rights.

Large numbers of these women had participated in the activities and demonstrations during the revolutionary upheaval and the insurrection that finally had led to the downfall of the Imperial regime. They had, at the time, ignored their rights as women and had hoped that once the

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new government was established, in a democratic atmosphere, they would pursue their own specific demands. What was neglected, however, was the realisation of a cultural and social resistance to women's rights deeply rooted in both Iranian and Muslim culture. Later developments and reforms proved this. Khomeini's very promising views on the position of women, given during his interviews prior to his return to Iran, were all proved to be false. Even those male supporters of the Islamic Republic, known as more moderate or progressive, in fact proved to be very reactionary when it came to their views on the rights and position of women. The dichotomy rationality/emotionality and the control of female sexuality, discussed earlier, was the basis of these men's views on women. Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, for example, claimed that the women were "too emotional" to become judges and that "from nature's point of view, there is no equality between the sexes in character or temperament, in physical or moral strength, or in aptitude."<sup>1</sup> President Bani Sadr's approval of Hajab'e Eslami<sup>2</sup> for women has its roots in his belief that women's hair has a radiation that is sexually arousing and destructive for men. The Presidential office issued a decree asking female civil servants to wear hejab'e Eslami when attending their workplace in an act to promote the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup>

## THE PROCESS OF ISLAMISATION

### Control of Mass Media

The Provisional Islamic Republican government was established in February of 1979 and with it the Islamisation process also began. The government took over the national radio and television station organisation and appointed Sadeyh Ghotbzadeh<sup>4</sup> who had worked very closely with Khomeini while in exile, and had accompanied him back to Iran, as its head. Ghotbzadeh who was famous for his opposition to the left, also had the task of purging the Shah's supporters from the radio and

television stations and replacing them with supporters of the revolution. The first consequence of this purging was that female television broadcasters were either sacked or forced to dress according to the Islamic code of dressing. Art and entertainment programmes were cancelled, musical programmes were limited and female singers were removed from the programmes.

#### Suppression of the Opposition

In August of 1979, the headquarters of the Fadayan and Mojahedin in Tehran was taken over by the Islamic government.<sup>5</sup> They were evacuated and their organisations and their publications declared illegal. This ended the short period of democracy enjoyed by these groups. They were now forced to organise underground. The Progressive groups continued to set up bookstalls and photographic exhibitions and sold their publications on the streets. Nevertheless, they were continually harassed and attacked by anti-left Muslim groups who also attacked the offices of other independent leftist groups and opposition newspapers. Finally, the last major national daily newspaper, Ayandegan, was forced to close down in September.

Attacks on opposition groups and women, burning of books and disruption of meetings and demonstrations of the opposition or protesting groups were mostly done by groups of young men with a strong allegiance to Khomeini and Islam, who were serving in the local committees, Komiteh. These were called Hezbollahi, or the Party of God supporters. The Komitehs which were formed in the first few months after the revolution, were by this time brought under the control of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) headed by Ayatollah Beheshti<sup>6</sup> who also became Minister of Justice. The IRP soon developed into the largest mass organisation in Iran with a nationwide network of religious establishments. It managed to recruit its supporters from among the poor and thus became a strong

and popular base for the Hezbollah party. This term which means party of God, was used in the years prior to the revolution to denounce all other political parties and ideologies. The followers of the Hezbollah believe that only Islam had the answer to the needs of society and only Islam could provide the doctrine to govern society. This in practice meant a one-party theocratic state which would not tolerate any opposition even by more liberal Muslims. Thus although the IRP did not declare itself to be the Hezbollah, in practice it followed that path, and therefore its members were called Hezbollahi, or God Party supporters.

The Fardaranj and the Komiteh men were dispatched from Tehran to other regions such as Torkarman Sahra and Kurdistan to crush all rebellions and demands for autonomy. Their task in Kurdistan was not so easy however. The Kurdish people, mainly Sunni Muslims, never felt allegiance to Khomeini and had a long tradition of rebellion against the central government of Tehran as they thought they were denied their national identity and autonomy. With their two organizations of Bezbe Demokrat-e Kordestan, Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Komoleh they continued their struggle and engaged the regime in a costly civil war.

In Kurdistan, a number of women's groups were formed after the revolution, in Sanandaj and Mahabad. These women's groups were linked to the political groups but soon were dissolved in order not to divert the energies and abilities of women activists who were needed in the liberation struggle. The KDP women's group is an example here of the needs of women's movements to be sacrificed and subordinated to the needs of the more general liberation movement.

#### Anti-Imperialist Stand

The occupation of the American Embassy by a group of Muslim students encouraged by the clergy in the government, in November 1979, and the taking of the American staff as hostages, unleashed a wave of

anti-American and anti-Imperialist emotions. This led to Bazargan's resignation and the direct rule by the revolutionary council, Shura-ye Ehoqlab, dominated by the clergy. The IRP thus using the opportunity identified themselves as the primary anti-Imperialist force in the country, attacked the opposition group and the liberals with whom they had shared power since the revolution, taking total control and power over the issue. Various increasing problems of the post-revolutionary period such as inflation, unemployment, censorship, the suppression of opposition and the attack on women's rights could now easily be ignored and all attention be drawn to the anti-Imperialist, anti-American move and to the fighting with the "Great Satan", Sheitane Rozorg, the American government.<sup>7</sup>

The deliberately prolonged hostage crisis and the manipulation of the IRP of the whole affair including documents found in the Embassy, started a series of articles published in the IRP newspaper Jumhuriye Eslami, Islamic Republic, which discredited all the liberal elements in the regime. Bani Sadr's election as the President was the only setback for the IRP but he was soon isolated and sacked. By this time, only the universities provided an open forum for the leftist opposition. In April 1980, the Hezbollah supporters attacked the universities and closed them down by force. Many students died and many were injured in the battles.<sup>8</sup> The unsuccessful attempt by the American government to rescue the hostages occurred around this time, again diverting attention to the threat of invasion by America and God's protection of the Islamic Republic. By this time the IRP had taken control of move government institutions appointing its members as their head. X

The bulk of the supporters of the IRP came from the poor strata of the population in the cities. During the last few years under the Shah's regime, this section of the population had grown larger rapidly. In the

1970s, most of the peasants who had migrated to the cities lived in poor districts and their children were brought up in slums. These were not individual workers but the proletarian population whose number had increased as the result of the closing down of businesses and increasing unemployment after the revolution.

This group inevitably came under the control of the clergy. At the end of the revolution, mosques had become organising centres in each area with the enormous funds of the Pahlavi Foundation and other public organisations under their control. They thus were able to organise these groups, financially sustain and feed them and to arm them and train them into the Army of the Guardians, Sepahe Pasdaran and then use them to promote their own aims.

#### The Cultural Revolution

Following the appointment of Rajai, the IRP candidate as Prime Minister in June 1980, the campaign against the opponents of the regime became harsher. A cultural revolution aiming at Islamisation of public institutions began. The universities were to undergo this process or stay closed. The cultural revolution appeared to be a move to wipe out all the remnants of Western culture imposed by Western imperialism. All institutions were supposed to get rid of the supporters of the previous regime together with bribery, inefficiency and corruption. The left and the liberal opponents of the regime were also affected by this campaign. The issue of compulsory veiling, hejab, was raised again as part of this campaign of cultural revolution in 1980. The cultural revolution was to bring back Islamic values and eliminate all Western influences of the Pahlavi time. The emphasis on compulsory veiling and the de-Westernising process limited women's work opportunities and was used to sack many women from their employment.

## THE REVERSED POSITION OF WOMEN

### Legal Position

With the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the judicial system existing under the Pahlavi reign, itself a combination of Western and Islamic law, underwent tremendous change and the new government strictly imposed and implemented Islamic law.

Women were among the first groups who lost the rights they had gained during many previous decades. The Family Protection Law and other legal reforms enacted during the Pahlavi period, which however incomplete, were positive in relation to the progress of women's conditions, were abolished. Legally, the status of women returned to its initial phase. It was not interpreted according to an Islamic philosophy of law corresponding in almost all its features to the sharia law. All matters relevant to the family, were again dealt with in the framework of the sharia and it follows that polygamy and the right to divorce was returned to men.<sup>7</sup>

This retreat to the Islamic Code of Law, as interpreted by the followers of Khomeini entailed a reintroduction of retribution as a cornerstone for legal reasoning. The changes enacted during the Islamic Republic, themselves a "reform" movement sponsoring Islamisation of society, resulted in an absolute deterioration of women's position in Iran. An analysis of the new Constitution and the Law of Retribution highlights this.

### The Constitution of 1979

In August 1979 the Majlis-e Khebragan, the Assembly of Experts, was formed of a group of anonymous people strictly adhering to Islamic law and morality, basically members of the clergy. These were elected through a national election. In the elections for the Assembly of Experts, there were a few women candidates from among whom Monireh Gorgi



was elected. Thus from over seventy members who drafted the Constitution of the new government, there was only one woman. She was from the traditional religious background promoted by the IRP and did not consider herself as being a "representative of women" in that assembly. In other words, women were not represented.

In comparison to the Constitution of 1905, if that Constitution was a combination of Western secular laws and Islamic regulation, the Constitution of 1979 was a complete declaration of a theocratic government. The basic source of inspiration for the laws and regulations in this Constitution is the divine source, the Koran and Islam. Every right given to a citizen has to be "in accordance with Islamic principles".<sup>10</sup> This would be verified by religious guardians who have the right to veto acts of Parliament. Highest in the hierarchy is the Supreme Guardian, Valayat-e Faqih, who is inspired directly from the Divine sphere and has all rights over the Parliament. In short, it provides the basis for a theocratic state ruled by Khomeini as the Supreme Guardian with unlimited power.

The Constitution and the manner in which it was drafted, was criticised not only by the left and the opposition groups but even by liberal Muslims, including Bani Sadr and Bazargan. The referendum for the final approval of the constitution was boycotted by the left, except for the Communist Party, Hezbe Tudeh. In many regions, boycotting of the Constitution resulted in fighting between the pasadarians and various opposition groups. In spite of all the opposition, however, the referendum produced a positive majority vote by those who voted and the Constitution was established in December 1979.

The parts devoted to women in the Constitution place great emphasis on the family and the role of women as wives and mothers. The implication of this is that women are not recognised outside of marriage

and family life. Article 10 of the Constitution recognised the family as the fundamental unit of the society:

Family is the fundamental unit of society and the major centre for the growth and advancement of men. Compatibility with respect to belief and ideal is the main consideration in the establishment of a family, for the family provides the primary basis for man's development and growth. It is the duty of Islamic government to provide the necessary facilities for the attainment of this goal. This view of the family unit delivers woman from being regarded as an object or as an instrument in the service of consumerism and exploitation. Not only does woman recover thereby her momentous and precious function of motherhood, rearing alert and active human beings, she also becomes the fellow struggler of man in all the different areas of life. Given the weighty responsibilities that a woman thus assumes, she is accorded in Islam great value and nobility.

The Islamic view in relation to the family<sup>11</sup> reflected in legal terms, is evident and it puts a woman in a position where she is totally controlled by men, reducing her to a subservient being while providing men with the right to divorce polygamy, temporary marriage and the like.

The emphasis on the segregation of male and female and on the chastity and virginity of women leads to early marriages, that is the formation of the family institution. The Constitution obliges the government to financially help young couples in their marriage and forming their family. Early marriages are followed by the creation of children and bind young women to household affairs, child rearing and the maintenance of the family, at the cost of their repression. Article 21 says:-

The government must assure the rights of women in all respects, in conformity with Islamic criteria, and accomplish the following goals: a) create a favourable environment for the growth of woman's personality and the restoration of her rights, tangible and intangible; b) the protection of mothers, particularly during pregnancy and child-rearing, and the protection of children without guardians; c) the creation of a competent court to protect and preserve the family; d) the provision of special insurance for widows and aged and destitute women; e) the guardianship of children to their mothers whenever suitable in order to protect the interests of the children, in the absence of a legal guardian.

It is apparent that this provision grants social rights to women while viewing them only in their role as mothers and wives. A woman's

place is considered to be in the family community and the government is obliged to protect her in this context. In the entire Constitution, despite the space devoted to women, there is no mention of single women, sterile women or women who are not willing to get married or have children, as if they were not a part of society.

The ambiguity about women's position is apparent from the beginning of the Constitution. Many questions arise here; for example rearing children, which is the basic duty of women, is not considered as being an "apparatus of work". It is not clear in what ways women can be responsible for both working at home and running the house and bringing up children as well as being "fellow strugglers with men"? Fellow strugglers in which "area of life"? Is this ambiguity of the women's position to facilitate the undermining of women's rights as human beings equal to men?

Article 163 of the Constitution declares that the qualifications for becoming a judge or magistrate will be determined in accordance with Islamic principles. It was mentioned earlier that Islamic precepts consider women emotional and therefore not suitable for conducting judgement. Under the previous regime, women had been enjoying the practice of law but since March 1979 permission for judicial practice by women was banned.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the reversal of the legal position of women and the abolition of legal gains of the Pahlavi period, the right to vote was kept for women. This is a major difference from the Constitution of 1905. The question that arises here is that if women are too emotional to become judges, how is it that they are not too emotional to elect or to be elected to a political position? In fact, Khomeini himself had opposed women's suffrage granted to them by the Shah in 1963. Why was he not opposed to it at this time? The simple answer is that the government

needed the support of female voters to establish itself.

In the elections following the establishment of the Constitution, 217 representatives were elected to the National Assembly, only two of them women. Both women were from very traditional religious backgrounds and always attended the Majlis in black traditional chador. They were both non-representative of women. The Islamic Republic needed the vote of illiterate and superstitious women as well as that of traditional and literate middle class women supporters of Khomeini.

#### The Law of Retribution

The Law of Retribution, Qhanoun-e Qhessas, was passed by the National Assembly in 1981. This is a document which establishes a new system of punishment to be applied for criminal cases such as premeditated murder, premeditated battery, cutting of limbs and the like. Most of it is derived directly from the Koran or the Sharia law practised by early Muslims based on community needs of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Mohammad. It consists of 199 articles dealing with the punishment of the guilty by lashing, stoning and the like. In short, it is a system in which the criminal is punished by an act equal to what he or she has committed. In the case of murder, the relatives of the victim may carry out the act of punishment.

In this law, social cultural and political issues facing Iranian society are not considered. Crime is viewed as an individual sin and not as a social issue and the punishment of criminals has been changed from the legal sphere into the personal sphere. Viewing crime as an individual sin, it considers prescriptions for dealing with crime as separate from efforts towards changing cultural, social and economic conditions which are influential in bring about crime. Its focus therefore is not the rehabilitation of the criminal but exclusively on retribution and punishment.

The introduction of the Retribution Law showed yet another discrimination against women. It was an attack on women's human rights and dignity. The law affects all Iranian citizens regardless of sex, age or class and its interference in private aspects of individual life is not limited to women but because women are expected to have higher standards of morality, they are put in a worse position. Since its imposition, this law has caused executions and the flogging of men and women accused of illegal sexual affairs.

According to the Retribution Law, if a Muslim man kills a Muslim woman, the relatives of the woman can murder him in the same way but they are obliged to pay half of the financial worth of the man to his next of kin before killing him. If a Muslim woman kills a Muslim man however, the man's relatives could kill her without any obligations to pay financial retribution to her kin. The murder of a pregnant woman should be postponed until after her child is born.

The Law of Retribution is very much an example of the character of the Islamic Republic. It reveals that the whole Islamic system of justice was founded on a practical system required for desert tribal communities' daily life and not based on moral criteria which could be applied universally. This system of law inevitably leads to a materialistic evaluation of human life.

#### Segregation and Sexual Morality

The month of June 1981 was a turning point in the struggles for power since 12 February 1979. The Mojahedin organisation, by then very popular among the masses, displayed their opposition to the government through large demonstrations and a rally which was addressed by Bani Sadr who was confident of his popularity and of his support in the army on the one hand, and had also realised that he was more and more isolated in the government, so allied himself with the Mojahedin. The Mojahedin by that

time were the largest opposition political organisation with an alleged 10,000 armed militia including a women's brigade. The liberals supporting Bani Sadr, also driven out by the government from key public positions, joined this alliance as well.

The Mojahedin, after announcing their opposition to the government, started a bloody uprising against the Islamic Republic. On 28 June 1981 they bombed the IRP headquarters, killing Ayatollah Beheshti and other prominent members of the party. There were various attacks on the Pasdaran and Komiteh buildings in Tehran. Subsequently a mass uprising occurred with drastic consequences for the Mojahedin and all the left wing opposition. A period of brutal executions and street fighting began. The Pasdarans began a systematic attack on the houses of Mojahedin families and arrested and killed those in the houses, even the children. Teenage boys and girls were executed on charges of not supplying information about the Mojahedin. Ayatollah Guilani, Tehran Prosecutor, announced that according to Islam, the age of nine for a girl is the age of puberty, so a nine year old girl is mature enough to be held responsible for her actions. A number of pregnant women were also executed.<sup>13</sup> These harassments, imprisonments and executions of the opposition groups by the regime increased in a systematic way. By 1983, according to the opposition publications abroad, there were 140,000 martyrs and 53,000 political prisoners and the executions still continued.

#### Education and Job Opportunities

On the position of women in the Islamic Republic, the imposition of the Hejab, in all public places represented the wider policies of sexual segregation. Schools and training centres, even the beaches are segregated. In government offices, public organisations, parks and even buses, segregation is observed. Women often face redundancy and female

government employees often feel insecure about their job. An interview with government employees reveals this insecurity:

The reality is that women employees have no security. They are all pressured on all fronts. The nurseries are shut. Unfortunately, women are still regarded in sexual terms, and not as half of the population. The sacking of women still continues. In our organisation they have been attempting for some time now to separate men and women. But to do this effectively, they must first organise retraining and new resources so that men and women who have been working under one roof so far, can leave their specialities and begin afresh. In this case, the government will have to invest a lot of money and incur large costs.<sup>14</sup>

Since the government is not willing nor able to invest in spending money to retrain people to work in parallel spheres and since the basis of social segregation of the sexes comes from the idea of the division of labour between men and women in which women's place is in the home, it continuously emphasises the virtues of motherhood and encourages women to stay at home. In this propaganda campaign the most popular women's magazine, Zane Rouz (Today's Woman), has been forced to publish articles by the clergy and the Islamic ideologies advocating the Islamic point of view on the role of women.

In the educational section, male coaches for physical education and public competitions for women in the presence of men are forbidden. This has greatly affected the standard of physical education for women as most coaches were male. Art, music, and drama as well as technical training, science and mathematics at high school have also suffered as most teachers of these subjects were male and male teachers were no longer allowed to teach in girls' schools.

The banning of male teachers from female schools has meant that in certain subjects such as mathematics and science and technology, where there is a higher proportion of male teachers, female students have been left without a teacher. After many protests by students, authorities have agreed to let middle-aged, married male teachers teach at girls' schools. The Ministry of Education directives still insist that the

presence of an unmarried young teacher at a female high school is a threat to public morality. In technical schools, all previously co-educational, and where the number of male students is higher, new training places have not been provided for female students and thus many female students had to change subject or quit their education.

At the level of university education, women are not allowed to study law. Educational facilities and text books have been altered for boys and girls. The Minister of Education has announced that in the design of books the different educational needs of boys and girls have been taken into account and that above certain educational level, the subjects will be altered in accordance with these differences.<sup>15</sup> This meant that there will be more sewing and cooking lessons and less mathematics, chemistry and technical and science lessons for girls. Also the Minister of Education claimed that there is a "surplus of female teachers" in Iran, thus encouraging and suggesting that female teachers take part-time jobs which was more suitable for wives and mothers.<sup>16</sup>

#### Combat against Adultery and Public Immorality

Combat against adultery and immorality started with efforts against prostitution and stoning and shooting to death of prostitutes. This was done immediately after the revolution with the setting on fire of the red light district in Tehran. A large number of prostitutes who repented and turned to Islam were kept in special places where they would enter temporary marriages with Muslim men. In other words, they became concubines acceptable to religion. Many women accused of adultery and of promotion of prostitution were sentenced to death and in Kerman, a woman accused specifically of this crime was stoned to death.

The inspiration of sexual morality also caused the rape and sexual assault of the opposition women arrested by Fasdaran. In most cases the summary courts have often added charges of moral corruption to their



political charges. This applied in particular to women of the Marxist or Mojahedin groups who lived in houses with their male comrades. The charge of adultery, which alone is punishable by the death penalty, or at the least by one hundred lashes, was in almost all cases given to those arrested.

The Ministry of Encouragement of Morality and the Combat against Immorality, Amre Be Ma'rouf Va Hahy Az Monkar, was set up by the government to investigate and report all cases of public immorality to special courts. Among its tasks is also preventing the consumption of alcohol and forbidden food and drugs. It has the authority to arrest people for listening to pop music, for holding parties where men and women participate together, and for even strolling or travelling in a car with a member of the opposite sex who is not a relative. They also control the dress code in particular for women and in implementing this there are groups of women who are called sisters of Zeinab, Khaharane Zeinab who stop women who are not dressed according to the Islamic Code, or whose hair is showing from under the scarf, or who wear make-up. The punishment of disobeying is normally one hundred lashes or imprisonment.

At the entrance of every government and public building, there is a special area, Bazresiye Khaharan, where women who want to enter those buildings are first examined to make sure that they are dressed according to the Islamic code and if not, they are stopped from entering the building and forced to change.

#### Encouragement of early Marriage

The atmosphere of sexual repression and discrimination has caused early marriages and rapidly following pregnancies for young women. The regime encourages marriage by not only continuously publicising its virtues but also by material incentives such as giving special grants and loans and discount prices on household goods. In this way marriage has

become the only effective solution to the problems of women. This has even been prescribed for prostitutes arrested at the beginning of the revolution as well as the unmarried criminal and the female drug addicts in prisons. The Pasdarans were encouraged to marry these women and save them from their "painful" lives by putting them under their own protective care, which husbands are supposed to provide. X

The regime's propaganda about early marriage could be seen as an effort to slow down the militancy among young people. Young girls who are married are then prevented by law from attending high school. With limited education, therefore, and unable to develop any skills outside the home, an increasing number of women were gradually being debarred from public and professional jobs. This by itself solves a great deal of the unemployment problems the regime is facing. The government, by encouraging moral chastity and by preventing sexual promiscuity, has also solved the problem of young wives of the martyrs of the war. Pasdarans are also encouraged to marry these young widows. This is considered another sacrifice for them in the way of the Revolution and of Islam.

#### CONTROL OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

##### Removal of Women from the Work Force

Repressive measures taken against women by the Islamic Republic authority evolved in the first few years after the establishment of the new government and as the political and economic status of the country deteriorated. Just one year after the revolution, in 1980, the industrial production was reduced to one third and the unemployment rate increased to 30 per cent.<sup>47</sup> The war with Iraq also had proved to be tremendously costly, both in terms of human resources and economically. Kurdish and other nationalities continued to be problematic for the government. Minority groups and other religious groups, in particular the Bahais, became the subject of severe harassment and many of their

members were imprisoned or executed.

Women were continuously the subject of physical and psychological harassment. The retrogressive policies of the state degraded women's status and made them legally, economically and politically invisible. Through repressive anti-female laws, women were eliminated from most paid work and were pushed back to the home environment through veiling and segregation.

Under the Islamic Republic rule, thousands of women have been removed from the work force. This was done systematically. First, the majority of women occupying professional positions such as judges, lawyers, engineers and professors lost their jobs. Then a great number of women were also dismissed for refusing to wear "Islamic cover". Many were forced to retire early or were dismissed with no explanation given to them. Also various psychological measures were used to encourage women to leave their jobs.

#### Conceptualisation and Usage of the Veil

Social harassment and strict office regulations and the imposition of dress code has forced women who had never worn the chador in their lives to observe the Islamic hejab, the veiling of women has also been imposed on them through non-official means through psychological pressures. For example, the refusal of taxi drivers or shopkeepers to serve unveiled women. More severe has been the physical attacks such as stabbing, beating and throwing acid in their faces. These have sometimes been done by veiled women, like the case of a veiled woman in Rasht who attacked two unveiled women, beating them with her cane.<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen in previous chapters, the question of the veil has been an issue at the centre of the question of women throughout the twentieth century in Iran. Feminist movements, at the beginning of the century, involved attempts to discard the veiling of women. Reza Shah

decreed the unveiling act in 1936 and imposed it by force. After his abdication, its use returned but was gradually being abandoned during Mohammad Reza Shah's rule. Then it was widely used as a symbol of opposition to the Pahlavi reign and finally was imposed again by the Islamic Republic.

The question of veiling is not, however, a question unique to the Iranian case, but it is common throughout the Muslim world. It is used as a mechanism of seclusion and segregation of women and the protection of men from distractions caused by the female sex. Covering women is a way to control sexual desire at her presence. In Iran, however, this concept has been politicised to encourage the use of veiling. Jame-ye Zanan-e Enghelab-e Eslami, Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution, for example, declared their support for the spread of Islamic cover in 1980. In their declaration, they equated the social responsibility of women with the concept of veiling saying that women as mothers of the future generation could not be indifferent towards the social order therefore they should be dressed in society not as individuals whose aims are "to satisfy their evil and inhumane desires", but they should also fight Western imperialism by veiling.<sup>19</sup>

This is only one example of linking veiling with social order. The question of veiling has remained at the centre of different social and political debates. The main concept is that female sexuality is the source of evil and distraction for men. Women are told to accept this and try to control it by covering themselves. A woman is socialized to have a negative view of her own body and sexuality; to perceive herself from the male point of view which says that her sexuality provokes them and is a threat to the social order. The Islamic Republic officials have politicised the issue by equating women's resistance to the veil with an Imperialist conspiracy to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Thus the use

of hejab has been advocated not only as the means of preserving Islamic culture and tradition but as a means of defending the national integrity. It is not being discussed only as a religious issue, but it is an important political, social and economic one. In whatever way the issue of the veil is viewed, whether by the anti-veiling campaign during Reza Shah's time or by pro-veiling male leaders of the Islamic Republic, the concept of veiling has never been addressed as an oppressive measure to control female sexuality.

The imposition of sexual morality, segregation laws, killing of prostitutes and lashing and killing of adulterers prove that the issue of female sexuality, and its control, has been the major incentive to the reactionary, legal, social and economic measures taken against women since the coming to power of the religious fundamentalists in Iran. Sexual complexes and frustrations of men have shown themselves through institutionalising segregation and veiling of women. Sexual frustrations of these males came out in different forms of attack against women. One incident could serve as an example. During women's demonstrations of 1979, there were a number of men who exposed their genitals to marching women telling them that was what they wanted.<sup>20</sup>

#### Control of Female Sexuality and manipulation of Power

The treatment of women seems to be very different under the Pahlavi regime when compared with the Islamic Republic. However, the personal views and feelings of the leaders of the two regimes, the Shah and Khomeini, towards women seem to be the same. They both represent traditional and cultural stereotypes of the male population of Iran. They both have an anti-female desire which is the result of their fear of female sexuality. The common views of the two leaders could be seen from their interviews with Oriana Fallaci. She has interviewed each man at different times in history and she has been able to reveal both men's

views and feelings towards women.

What Fallaci's interview with the Shah revealed was his machoism from under the cover of his "progressive" reforms on the position of women. The Shah, like many religious leaders, did not believe in women's intellectual ability.<sup>221</sup> To him, women were the lesser sex, objects of pleasure and childbearing. In spite of his personal views however, the Shah had no objection to women's participation in different professions. He had a strong desire for power and a confused value system. His strong capitalistic views and his policies had also caused the exploitation of the majority of women.

Khomeini came from a totally different world and was a religious man who believed Islam had the answer to all questions. His person and his religion had become one. His view of the female sex is therefore based on the interpretation of the Koranic verse. The classic interpretations perceive woman as a symbol of disorder and a source of evil who causes chaos, fitna, in society.<sup>222</sup> According to this interpretation, these are inherent in female nature, therefore a woman should cover herself and should be controlled by rules and regulations of Islam. These rules and regulations, of course, include segregation and veiling.

On various occasions, Khomeini has emphasised the importance of the veil. On one occasion he even declared that one of the greatest achievements of the Islamic Revolution has been the return of the veil.<sup>223</sup> His obsession with the veiling of women and his belief that unveiled women distract men, was shown in his interview with Fallaci quoted below. This is a classical perception of female as the seducer of male. Veiling is therefore needed to protect men from this seductive power of the female sex.

Women who contributed to the revolution were, and are, women with the Islamic dress, not elegant women all made up like you, who go around all uncovered, dragging behind them a tail of men. The coquettes who put on makeup and go into the street showing off their

necks, their hair, their shapes, did not fight against the Shah. They never did anything good, not those... And this is so because, by uncovering themselves, they distract men, and upset them.<sup>24</sup>

Khomeini's fear of female sexuality and the need to control it is shown in his book where he asserts that women should cover themselves even in front of a young boy who has not reached the age of puberty but might have sexual desire; it is alright for a man to take the picture of a woman but he should not look at it afterwards; and if a man could cure a woman by only looking at her, he should avoid touching her and if he could cure her by only touching her, he should avoid looking at her.<sup>25</sup>

Khomeini's views on women are representative of traditional religious male values; those of the Shah represent the traditional macho values. They are both stereotypes of the Iranian male population. The shah's inner feelings towards women were hidden under the cover of his desire for power and progress. Like many "modernised" and "westernised" Iranian males, he was caught in the contradictory and conflicting values of East and West. Khomeini on the other hand showed no reservations in bluntly expressing his views. He even sees himself as the interpreter of God's words. The attitude and actions of both men go beyond themselves, being for or against the progress of women. They stem from their will to control and manipulate power. The issue is the control of the state over men, and of men over women, which is not unique to Iran.

### Notes to Chapter 5

1. "And Now a Word from the Male Leader of the Islamic Republic", Ms., June 1979, p.95.
2. Enghelabe Eslami, (Islamic Revolution), 2nd year, No.294, 12 Tir 1359/3 July 1980. p.6. Also No.295, 14 Tir 1359/5 July 1980.
3. Enghelabe Eslami, 2nd year, No.297, 16 Tir 1359/7 July 1980. p.1.
4. Ghotbzadeh was executed by firing squad in 1982 on charges of anti-revolutionary activities.
5. Refer to Chapter 7 for more detailed discussion on Fadayan and Mojahedin stands and activities.
6. Ayatollah Beheshti was killed in 1981 by an explosion of a bomb planted by Mojahedin in the IRP headquarters.
7. This term has been used by Khomeini to refer to the United States government.
8. For a full report on attacks on students during this period, refer to the publication of Kanoun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran (Writers' Association of Iran), No.6, Khordad 1359/June 1980.
9. As a result of a protest campaign by women members of Parliament however, women were given the right to divorce on condition that it appeared in their marriage contracts, and special civil courts were set up to deal with divorce.
10. Islamic principles regarding the position of women have been discussed in Chapter 4.
11. See Chapter 4.
12. "Karnameh-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami Dar Mored-e Zanan" (The Record of Islamic Republic on Women), Raha'i, 2nd year, No.69, 13 Farvardin 1360/3 April 1981. pp.11-12.
13. See appendix to Mujahed, No.261, 15 Shahrivar 1364/14 September 1985, for the list of names including children and pregnant women.
14. Ettelaat, 26 November 1981, rep in Azari (ed.), Women of Iran, (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), p.219.
15. Ettelaat, 13 January 1982.
16. Ibid.
17. "The Leftist: A Waiting Game", Time, 26 May 1980. p.31.
18. Enghelabe Eslami, 2nd year, No.297, 16 Tir 1359/7 July 1980. p.3.
19. Karname-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami dar Mored-e Zanan", Raha'i, 2nd year, No.69, 13 Farvardin 1360/3 April 1981. p.11.



20. "Iran: Five Days in March", Ms, June 1979. p.96.
21. Oriana Fallaci, Interview with History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976). pp.271-72.
22. For an analysis of classic interpretation of female sexuality in Islam refer to Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975).
23. Perdiss newspaper, No.14, 1 Farvardin 1360/21 March 1981. p.1.
24. Oriana Fallaci, "An Interview with Khomeini", New York Times Magazine, 7 October 1979. pp.29-31.
25. R. Khomeini, Resale-ye Tozihol Masa'el, (Thesis on the Clarification of Problems), (m.p., n.d.). pp.388-89.

Chapter 6

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS SINCE THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The development of women's movements and the position of women after the Revolution need to be considered within the broader context of political changes since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. This chapter analyses the formation of various secular and religious women's groups and their development in relation to the prevailing policies of the government discussed in the previous chapter.

In spite of restrictions imposed on women by the Islamic Republic, a review of the development of women's rights movements in post-revolutionary Iran shows that although the position of women has been reversed, the question of women's position and rights within the Iranian society has become a prominent issue and the subject of debate for almost all political groups. This in itself is a sign of hope for women and should this regime be defeated, the women's issue will play a significant role in the development of any political system which will replace it. The social forces that will come to power will have to consider the position of women.

DISAPPOINTMENT AFTER THE REVOLUTION

During the short period of democracy which existed immediately after the Revolution in Iran, a number of independent Iranian women's groups flourished. The starting point for many of these groups was the International Women's Day in March 1979, when women, while celebrating the International Women's Day, also protested against the repressive measures that the new regime had started to take against them.<sup>4</sup>

Many women had hoped that this demonstration and the demands of women from the government would be the beginning of women's achievement in defending and gaining their rights. Women were now challenging very consciously the patriarchal norms that governed them for many centuries.

However, the reaction of the authorities and the progressive groups, and later political developments within the Islamic Republic, proved that patriarchal norms were stronger and more deeply rooted than women had imagined. The repressions and legal restrictions of June 1981 which banned the activities and publications of the leftist and progressive groups, also included preventing the activities and publications of non-Muslim women's groups. In addition, the government imposed traditional Muslim laws and regulations on women.

The complexity of the Iranian revolution and the popularity of the fundamentalists has made the revolution appear to be very retrogressive. What should not be overlooked here is the growing opposition of progressive groups within the revolution to the regime. The struggle of these groups for democracy and against imperialism has now been suppressed and thus the work of the opposition, especially those of the left movement and the socialist feminist ones, is more difficult. The public, and in particular women, compare the present situation with the one under the Shah's regime when they were more prosperous and thus believe that the revolution has made it worse.

This negative attitude is felt very acutely on the question of women. The monarchists in particular emphasise the few gains of women and the better position they enjoyed under the Shah's regime and thus claim that it was progressive and pro-women. They do not realise that the few rights that women had gained, such as the expansion of education and job opportunities for women and legal reforms in favour of women, were the results of the post second world war capitalist development in Iran and that this dependent development did not cause the fundamental social and economic changes favourable for the emergence of social democracy. The Pahlavi regime's preoccupation with blocking all the channels of public and political expressions meant that all the

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formations, including those around women's emancipation, were directed by the regime's official organs and controlled by it. There was no independent women's movement under the Shah's regime. The militant and revolutionary women of the period who were possible leaders of such independent movements had no option but to join the underground guerilla movements which were struggling against the dictatorship of the Shah.

These women, whether guerillas, students or class conscious workers, hoped that the revolution would overthrow the oppressive regime and replace it with democracy, independence, and improvement in the position of themselves and other oppressed groups. Thus the movement against the Pahlavi dictatorship became most important. Any other demands became secondary at the time. As a result during the revolutionary upheavals starting from 1978, feminist consciousness and demands submerged within the broader opposition. However, women's self-awareness and confidence were boosted through their mass participation in the events preceding the revolution. As a result of this lack of feminist demands though, the potential for women's liberation caused by this process diminished as the dominant ideology of the revolution became Islamic. The dominance of this ideology meant that women were encouraged to strike, demonstrate and face arms in opposition to the Shah. Yet they were at the same time encouraged to submit to this ideology which defined them as the weaker sex and with rights different to those of men which put limits on their actions and way of life as human beings.<sup>22</sup>

## FEDERATION OF WOMEN LAWYERS

As a consequence of the process of Islamisation, prominent positions in the legal profession were also given to religious authorities. The result was that the Ministry of Justice began its campaign against practice by women judges and magistrates and training programmes for female law graduates were cancelled. The Federation of women Lawyers, Jamyate Zanane Hoghoughdan, was formed in opposition to this act of government. These women had just realised that the authorities intended to eliminate women from all aspects of the judiciary. At this time rumours also had begun to circulate that the Family Protection Law was to be abolished. There were cases of husbands who had been able to obtain unconditional divorce certificates from the notary publics and had bypassed the Family Protection Courts set up to deal with matters concerning divorce and the custody of children.

The Federation of Women Lawyers was among the first women's groups formed immediately after the revolution. This organisation, during the first months of the revolution, organised many sit-ins, petitions and leaflet campaigns. They were initially supported by all the leftist groups in their demands. However, they were not supported in action, as their demands and problems, according to these groups' view, were not relevant to that of the masses. Later on, however, as the religious leaders' hold over the government and the judicial system strengthened, it became obvious to these groups that women judges and lawyers were not the only ones that were to be eliminated. The whole secular legal system had to be abolished and replaced by Sharia courts and the system of Islamic justice. The legal profession as understood in the West, was destroyed in Iran and the struggle of women lawyers was lost in the process.

WOMEN'S PROTESTS AND DEMONSTRATIONS

At the beginning of the revolution when provisional government was established, it was very difficult for women who had participated in the revolution to believe that the very revolutionary force they had supported had set out to take oppressive and restrictive measures against them. There had been commentaries by religious leaders about veiling for women and the abolition of the Family Protection Law,<sup>3</sup> but none of these had been taken seriously by women. However, as the oppressive measure of the new government against women began to unfold, women became more and more alarmed about the loss of their rights.

As early as two weeks after his return, Khomeini ordered the Ministry of Justice to review the Family Protection Act and eliminate all the sections that contradicted Islamic principles.<sup>4</sup> Even at this time, many women found it hard to believe that Khomeini himself had started the repressive measures against women. They blamed Khomeini's aides as being responsible for the elimination of this law. A minority of women of the educated middle classes became extremely alarmed and worried.

The increasing anxieties of the educated and middle class women coincided with the events of the preparation for the International Women's Day on 8 March 1979. Since a few weeks prior to the Women's Day, newly formed women's groups had had meetings at Teheran University in preparation for a rally in remembrance of this day which had been banned under the reign of the Shah for many years. The day before the demonstration, Khomeini had denounced the International Women's Day as being a Western phenomenon and had emphasised the need for hejab for women. This caused more anger and disappointment among women and increased the number of women participants.

Many women who went to work the following morning were told to wear a scarf before even entering the building. Many of these women refused to do so and organised demonstrations. For example, female employees of the Foreign Ministry staged a demonstration outside the ministry in protest. Great numbers of them gathered at Teheran University joining others in the demonstration against the imposition of compulsory veiling. An estimated 8,000 - 10,000 women had joined these demonstrations and what was planned to be a one day celebration became a five day act of protest.

During these five days, women asked for equal rights and shouted slogans such as "In the Spring of Freedom, We Have No Freedom". They also demanded a greater voice in the government, equal pay for equal work, the right to choose their own way of dressing and the preservation of the Family Protection Law. The majority of these women were unveiled but some veiled women were among them. There was also a minority of men supporters among these demonstrating women.

These demonstrations, despite their coverage in the Western media, were not covered by the Iranian national television and radio news coverage. The reason for this was that the new director of national radio and television, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh had not only decided against coverage of the event in the news but had also organised a rally against women's demonstrations. There were an estimated 100,000 people, thousands of veiled women among them, shouting slogans in support of Ghotbszadeh and the Islamic Republic.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the great number of women participating in this rally, it was faced with opposition and hostilities by men and women supporters of the regime and revolutionaries of both left and right ideology.<sup>6</sup> Women demonstrators were physically and verbally abused. They were subjected to attacks by fanatical groups, beaten, knocked down and

stabbed by them. Women participants were threatened and were called "prostitutes", "American agents", and supporters of the previous regime. The rally was dismissed and demands of women were ignored. Women were attacked and harassed and a year later, compulsory veiling was imposed on them.

#### FORMATION OF WOMEN'S GROUPS

The positive outcome of the events around the organising of the rally for International Women's Day and the protest against the abolition of the Family Protection Law and compulsory veiling, was the formation of two new women's groups, the National Union of Women, Ettehad-e Melliye Zan and the Women's Emancipation, Rahaiye Zan. Most smaller groups that had formed earlier disappeared under subsequent repression and their members joined these two organisations.

The National Union of Women (NLW) was basically formed of university students and professional women like teachers, nurses, and office workers. This organisation supported the Fadayan organisation and most of its members considered themselves Marxist-Leninist in ideology. A minority of its members, however, were supporters of other Marxist groups. The NLW published a bi-weekly newspaper called Equality, Barabari, and a monthly magazine called Women in Struggle, Zan Dar Mobarezeh. These publications became irregular later on as their work was increasingly forced underground. In the short period of their public activities, they organised literacy classes, photographic exhibitions and had regular political seminars and discussion groups. They managed to grow into a national organisation with centres in most major cities.

The Women's Emancipation (WE), also a Marxist group, was formed mainly of non-aligned Marxist women. Their publication was a bi-weekly paper called Women's Emancipation, Rahaiye Zan. They also organised regular meetings, seminars and publications but were not successful in



expanding into a national organisation.

Other non-marxist groups that were formed in this period included the Society of Iranian Women, Jamiyat-e Zananeh Iran, which was organised by middle-class nationalist groups and was linked to the nationalist Iran Party, Hezbe Iran, initially formed in the 1940s and the women's group of the National Democratic Front, Jebhe Demokratike Melli, which also included some socialists and marxists in its membership. Both of these organisations held meetings and conferences but did not have a publication of their own, only statements released in the press.

Various state supported Muslim women's groups were also formed. Their main tasks were to boost the influence of the regime and to publicise Islamic views and ways on women. Their members were basically religious and traditional women.<sup>7</sup> These national and political women's organizations were not the only expressions of the new shape of women's movements in revolutionary Iran. There were also numerous smaller women's groups that were formed in women's work places and in relation to the women's professions and needs. The best known of these groups is the Federation of Women Lawyers mentioned above. Among other small women's groups, the ones formed at the National Bank, the Ministry of Labour, the Telecommunications Office, and the Planning Organisations and other ministries and public organisations, as well as some factories with high numbers of female employees. These small groups were basically formed around specific needs such as equal pay for women, provisions for childcare facilities, maternity benefit and in many cases employers were forced to provide child care facilities where they did not exist or expand the existing ones. The members of these small groups participated in the demonstrations against compulsory veiling for female government and public employees which was introduced in 1980. By 1981, however, the government had succeeded in sacking or silencing active feminist women

involved in organising women and articulating their specific demands.

The revolution had also caused specific problems such as unemployment, particularly among the young. Many groups of young women and female students and teachers participated in the action against these specific problems. There were many demonstrations and occupation of the Ministry of Labour and other ministries by various groups of unemployed who were demanding that the government should regenerate many businesses that were abandoned by fleeing owners, so that they could be run by the workers themselves. There was an unemployed women's group that participated in these events around the issue of unemployment.

In provincial towns, women in the educational fields displayed great militancy. Protesting young women, mostly high school girls, occupied the Ministry of Education offices in their town on various occasions, sometimes holding top officials as hostages in order to facilitate negotiations. One such incident occurred in October 1979 in Kashan.<sup>2</sup>

These groups of young female protesters could be categorised into two groups, the first one being high school or university graduates who were promised jobs at the end of their service in the army educational corps. These had been introduced under the Shah's regime and were undertaken in the place of compulsory army service for both men and women. Under the new regime, these were withdrawn because of the cuts in public spending. The second category were female students in technical schools who had been dismissed because the new regime had dismantled coeducation. The government had refused to provide separate facilities for them as they were too few in number and they had been forced to change courses or abandon their studies altogether.

Female high school students, alongside male students, also very often participated in demonstrations not just related to women's issues but in support of other issues. With the increase in censorship, harass-

ment and imprisonment of the left the demands of these demonstrators included more and more the demand for freedom of speech and against censorship.

ISLAMISATION PROCESS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Throughout the first year of their establishment, the Islamic government imposed segregation policies which affected educational, leisure and job opportunities for women. In addition, the abolition of the Family Protection Law, lowering the age of marriage for women to thirteen, banning married girls from attending high schools and other restrictions such as banning the practice of women judges and lawyers, became of great concern to a great number of women. The protests of March 1979 against the compulsory veiling and the abolition of the Family Protection Law had caused a partial retreat by the government and Family Protection Courts were set up to safeguard women's rights in matters concerning divorce. The new Constitution also made it clear that women were going to have a very limited role to play in the government of the Islamic Republic.<sup>9</sup>

A number of professional women's groups, the national Union of Women and the Women's Emancipation groups jointly set up the Women's Solidarity Committee, Komiteye Hambastegi-e Zanān in order to coordinate their activities. Their first joint move was to organise a conference on 25 November 1979 in Teheran Polytechnic University. Thousands of women participated in this successful conference. During the evening session of the conference, electricity was cut off by the opposition groups but a resolution was read by candlelight. While denouncing various measures taken against women since the revolution, this resolution called for equal rights for women in the family and society, as well as full participation of women in political and social affairs. It also dealt with problems of fighting imperialism and establishing democracy. The

emphasis on imperialism and equal military training for women to fight with American imperialism was a response to the hostage crisis that had started earlier that month.

The success of this conference encouraged the committee to continue its activities and to organise and prepare for the celebration of International Women's Day in March of the following year, 1980. On that day a large rally was held in Teheran University and many messages of solidarity from various progressive organisations both in Iran and abroad were read. The committee was then renamed the Women's Solidarity Council, Shoraye Hambasteqi-e Zanan. Meetings and rallies were also held on that day in various major cities by members.

By this time, however, disagreement that had occurred among the members of the committee had created an ideological split among them. This reflected the split and sectarian differences that existed among different Marxist organisations in Iran with whom these various women's groups within the committee were affiliated. The National Union of Women which was the largest and had drawn most of its membership and supporters from the Fadayan female members or supporters, organised a separate rally.<sup>10</sup>

As the regime's restriction on the activities of the leftist groups became stronger, the Women's Solidarity Council became inactive. The news Bulletin of the Council published in September 1980 showed, very clearly, the dilemma facing the women's movements and showed that severe repression had made the struggle for democracy more important than struggle for the women's cause. It declared that as women faced injustice, to them it seemed sometimes impossible to fight for specific rights and that they often felt it was more necessary to continue their struggle in other ranks.<sup>11</sup>

In July 1980, the Women's Emancipation group and a small

Marxist-Leninist women's group called the Society of Militant Women Anjomane Zanane Mobarez, joined together to continue the activities of the council and with the hope of preparing to resist the eventual introduction of compulsory veiling by the regime. The imposition of the compulsory veiling by the regime had failed the previous year but women were expecting its re-introduction at some later stage.

On 4 July, however, the decree of compulsory veiling was announced by Prime Minister Rajai. According to this bill, women attending government offices and public organisations had to observe Islamic dress and wear a scarf, hejab-e Eslami. Members of women's groups demonstrated outside the Prime Minister's Office but were faced with Hesbollahi groups who attacked them. Nevertheless President Bani Sadr agreed to see the representatives of these groups to discuss their demands.

The following day representatives of NLW and WE handed in their resolutions with five points demanding changes in marriage and divorce laws, lifting restrictions on women's education and job opportunities in particular that of women in legal practice, and an immediate cancellation of compulsory veiling and finally an end to the harassment of women doctors, teachers, office workers, and all professional women. This last point was in reference to a campaign in the newspaper Islamic Republic against the women who had participated in recent demonstrations. This campaign had denounced these women as counter-revolutionaries, imperialist agents, Western "dolls", prostitutes and promiscuous women who supported the Shah and Hakhtiar, his last Prime Minister, and who were using the issue of women's rights to destabilise the revolution and the Islamic Republic.

The ruthless opposition of the regime, however, gradually drove women's protests underground in order to survive. In the following year, thousands of women lost their jobs or were forced to retire early on

charges of refusal to observe the hejab or as sympathisers of the Shah's regime and as victims of the campaign to cut expenses. In addition, as the government was facing the still increasing problems of unemployment, women were encouraged to stay at home and the virtues of housekeeping and motherhood were preached to women. Women were reminded that their primary duty was to be good mothers to bring up good children and thus leave the job opportunities outside the domestic sphere to men.

IMPOSITION OF THE DRESS CODE

A campaign against women who did not wear a scarf and the Islamic dress was launched in July and August of that year. Women were continuously injured in the streets and public places by stones and sharp objects and acid thrown at them or by stabbing or beating. These attacks were by anonymous groups of men and although the government issued warnings to the attackers, there is no record of arrests or punishment for these groups. Later on, however, the punishment of women not wearing the hejab-e Eslami became more official and included lashing those parts of the body, arms or legs, that were not covered. Gradually the wearing of make-up or nail polish was also forbidden and women had to enter a special room to be examined for proper Islamic dress before entering any government premises.

Public pressure against women seemed to ease with the beginning of the war against Iraq in September 1980. Instead, the issue of Martyrdom was concentrated on and it seemed that for a short period of time the preoccupation of the attackers shifted from aggression towards women to aggression towards the enemy and the hope of finding the promised heaven through martyrdom. However, by June 1981, Bani Sadr had left the political scene. The more orthodox religious leaders consolidated their power excluding the more liberal and moderate Muslims within the government. The issue of women's dress and position was then taken up

again but with a greater emphasis. Government directives banned the employment of unveiled women in all public places and private firms. Shopkeepers were instructed not to serve unveiled women customers. The national airline, Iran Air, was instructed not to carry unveiled women. Even taxi drivers refused to carry unveiled women.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE SILENCE OF THE PROGRESSIVE GROUPS

The silence of the left wing organisations with regard to the imposition of the dress code for women also helped the regime to achieve its goal easier and sooner. During the demonstrations of March 1979 both Edayan and Mujahedin and other smaller Marxist groups, did not support the cause of women and the demonstrations. The Mojahedin and the Communist Party criticised women for playing into the hands of imperialism and thus creating dangers for the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

Other left wing organisations had also denounced women's demonstrations and objections. The question of the Hejab for them was relevant only to a minority of middle class women and thus irrelevant to the cause of the revolution. The argument was that there should be freedom of choice of one's clothing yet since the majority of Iranian women were already using the Chador, compulsory veiling was not a great problem.

The following year, however, most of these groups published articles in support of equality for women and discussed problems of the exploitation of women but did not or could not present concrete programmes to combat the exploitation of women to achieve equality.

The Democratic Organisation of Women, the Communist Party's women's group, presented a programme of action in its manifesto and began to publish a monthly magazine for women called Women's World, Jahane Zananeh. However, as the Communist Party and therefore its women's group, had total allegiance to the regime, this magazine simply echoed the regime's

views on most major issues.<sup>44</sup> The Tudeh Party newspaper also had joined in accusations of demonstrating women against the compulsory veiling.

#### MUSLIM WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

Immediately after the revolution, the Women's Organisation of Iran, Sazemane Zananeh,<sup>45</sup> a government controlled network of women's organisations, and the only one in the Shah's Iran, headed by the Shah's sister Ashraf, was abolished. This organisation was set up in the early 1960s and had expanded considerably in the last two decades of the Shah's regime. By the late 1970s, it had branches in almost all major cities and towns throughout Iran. It had organised literacy, health education and craft classes for women. It also ran centres to deal with family problems. It had libraries and research departments which collected data and published books on the position of women.

In the last year before the revolution, this organisation was run down with many redundancies and closed down most of its branches. This was, among other problems, as a result of the organisation being strongly identified with the regime and in particular with the Shah's sisters and other members of his family.

Following the February insurrection, however, most of its resources were appropriated by a number of Muslim revolutionary women, allied very closely with the new Islamic regime. They organised themselves as the Muslim Women's Movement, Nehzat-e Zananeh Mobsalman. Their major activity was in the form of propaganda for the regime and for Islam in general. However, their publication was edited and run mostly by men and contained irrelevant articles such as the biography of Ghotlzadeh. Most articles discussed different aspects of Islamic ideology and the life of the family of the prophet Mohammed. This organisation was not successful and lasted only one year.

The prominent leader of these Muslim women was Aazam Taleghani, who



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became politically very active and well known. Aazam is the daughter of Ayatollah Taleghani the popular and most liberal of the leading clergymen. Aazam capitalised on her father's position and was also helped by her total identification with traditional Islam and support for the regime.

Aazam Taleghani, politically active and involved as she was, then became a member of Parliament. When she left the Muslim Women's Movement, she founded the Society of Women for the Islamic Revolution, Jameye Zanan-e Enqelab-e Eslami. This new women's organisation was also helped by the new regime. The focus of its activities has been to organise educational classes such as literary and Islamic ideology, handicrafts, sports and military knowledge. It does not have a regular publication but often releases statements on current issues to the press.

#### WOMEN'S ACTIVITY : MEN'S PUBLICITY

Various Islamic societies that were founded in the work places also have founded their own Muslim women's groups. These include the Society of Muslim Women Office Employees, Muslim Nurses, and Muslim Teachers. These women's societies, in the first few years after the revolution, were very instrumental in establishing the influence and hegemony of the government and in particular the IRP among women. They inevitably became a means of propaganda for the Islamic ideology preached by the government authorities. Their major activities throughout the early years of the revolution, have been to organise seminars and meetings on the position of women in Islam.

In July 1980, the Society of Muslim Women Office Employees organised a seminar in Teheran around the time the compulsory veiling for women and public employees was introduced. The seminar was given full coverage in the media and was very well publicised. The seminar opened with readings of the Koran, then a taped speech by Khomeini on Women's rights, followed

by another speech by Bani Sadr, then President of the Islamic Republic, which was read by a representative of his office. Bani Sadr's message to Iranian women was that they should free themselves from Western exploitation, meaning from blindly imitating the Western ways and fashion. Instead, they should concentrate on building a new Iran, where production came first and consumption later. The message also was to remind them that they had a duty to identify and establish real Islamic values and not to be diverted by irrelevant issues (presumably including that of the hejab). Most of the activities and publications of these groups were led or dominated by men and thus they never concerned themselves with the real, concrete, everyday problems of women. Bani Sadr's speech was not concerned with the traditional exploitation of women through discriminatory law and practice, although he represented a more progressive liberal element within the regime.

The following days of the seminar were also filled with speeches by clerics and supporters of the regime, again mainly men, who elaborated and justified the Islamic position on women and its regulations regarding women. The resolution passed at the end of this seminar, while confirming its support of Khomeini and the Islamic Government, the pasdarans and the new Islamic security forces, asked the Islamic parliament to devise new Islamic laws, especially about women.

In response to the secular women's movement which had expanded since the revolution, the government organised rallies on a new Islamic Women's Day, the birthday of Fatima daughter of the prophet Mohammed, on 7 May 1980. This day is based on the lunar calendar and therefore changes every year. The committee set up to organise the march consisted of the new security forces, the IRP and various other Islamic societies. This event had been repeated since, to mobilise great numbers of Muslim women and stage propaganda for the government.

## CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The mobilisation of women in this way has been more concerned with confirming the authority of the Islamic Republic rulers rather than tackling the problems that women are facing. Thus women MF's, although strong supporters of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic, have constantly complained and criticised about the problems faced by women. The campaign for women's right to the custody of children, by Mrs. Dastgheib, IRP candidate in July 1981, and the parliamentary speeches by Mrs. Maryann Behrouzi criticising the government on this issue, are examples of the dissatisfaction of even prominent Muslim women on the issue.

The case of women's rights to the custody of their children became tense, since the beginning of the war with Iraq, many young women who lost their husbands in the war, have also lost their children, confiscated by their husband's relatives. This practice has been sanctioned through the revival of traditional Islamic laws which have replaced the repealed Family Protection Law, and which, in the absence of the father, gives the right of guardianship to his male relatives, either grandfather or, in his absence, a man appointed by himself or the religious judge, rather than to the mother. Thus a woman has to suffer doubly, first the loss of her husband and subsequently her children. There were lots of letters to women MF's putting pressure on them to change this situation. Various discussions and letters on this issue were published in Zane-Rouz during the first few months following what is now known as the Gulf Wars.

The law was finally ratified by the Islamic Republic parliament in February 1982. It gave women limited rights of custody of their children. However, the guardianship is still that of the male member of the family. The small concession made by the government was the result

of Mrs. Dastgheib's warning that the government, which was supposed to help those young children of the martyrs, the war orphans, was instead driving their mothers into rebelling against Islam and thus they might become easy prey for the counter-revolution.<sup>16</sup>

The pressures on the women MPs to criticise the position of women in the Islamic government is also shown by the speech of Maryann Behrouzi, a candidate of the Sacrificers of Islam, Fadayan-e Eslām on the position of women. The Sacrificers of Islam were a religious group prominent in the assassination and terror campaign of the 1950s. They were, however, almost wiped out by the Shah's regime in the 1960s. This group was revived during the revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini, the infamous Iranian Islamic judge who ordered mass executions of many opposition groups during the first few years of the revolution, was a prominent member of this group. Since the elections in 1981, Mrs. Behrouzi had made very few public statements, generally in praise of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic. Under the pressure of women, however, she was forced to talk on women's issues in parliament. In her major speech on the issue, she pointed out that due to ignorant and "male chauvinistic" ideas of men in the past century, women have been under tremendous pressure and humiliation. Because of this, she continued, they fell into the false call of the West to freedom and women's liberation and they became tied to imperialism through the colonial culture. She then claimed that once women became familiar with the truth and teachings of Islam, they would be prepared to offer their wealth, their life and their children for the sake of God. She then went on to say:

But now we find that although the slogans in praise of women and their rights are plentiful, in practice some of their just rights are sacrificed to unacceptable and semi-Islamic wishes, and also that under various excuses they are driven out of public life... So what I am saying here is that we should step beyond slogans and I want to use this first opportunity that I have had after six months to address the courts, the government, the parliament, and finally the people.<sup>17</sup>

Mrs. Behrouzi then went on to complain about the special Civil Courts which handle divorce and marriage matters. She complained that some of these courts forced women to put up with all problems from their husbands but have allowed men to repudiate their wives when they wanted. She also refers to men who beat up and injure their wives and asks why not a single one has been punished for violating a woman in such a manner. She then addressed the government saying:

The honourable government should make its policy with regards to women's employment clear. Does it have any knowledge of these contradictory and antagonistic directives against women that every so often are circulated in the various ministries? I asked the Prime Minister and he said: "No, I have no knowledge of it!..."<sup>18</sup>

She also discussed maternity leave for women and the cases of women who have been sacked at the end of their maternity leave and the women specialists who have been made redundant. She referred to Article 21 of the Constitution that guarantees women's rights in all areas and warned that the Constitutional rights of women have been violated and that this would benefit the counter-revolution. She concluded her speech by urging women to seek education and said that through education, women could play a great role in advancing their Islamic aims in political, economic, social, and cultural fields. However, she put the single condition to be the wearing of the hejab to be both a political and a religious obligation. She urged them to be aware of the country's problems and its foreign policy and not to be put off by the atmosphere which has been created against them.<sup>19</sup>

#### FEMINISM OR RELIGIOUS DICTATORSHIP?

Muslim feminists such as Behrouzi and Dastgheib with their traditional and religious background and limited formal education, in spite of their criticism on women's issues, are very committed to the Islamic Republic. These women have shown that when they are put in prominent positions and when exposed to the problems of women, they

become vocal and active in seeking reforms. Their case is different from those women who strongly back the regime more out of their intellectual belief and commitment to religious dictatorship than simple conformism to tradition. An example of this group is Zahra Rahnavard, a sister-in-law of the President Ayatollah Khamenei and the wife of the Prime Minister Mousavi.

Zahra Rahnavard has written a number of books on Islamic ideology in Iran. After the revolution she wrote a series of articles in Ettelaat, Information, the daily newspaper which was taken over by the religious fundamentalists after the February insurrection. She later became the editor of the weekly women's magazine, Lady's Information, Ettelaate Banovan. This magazine, previously appealing to middle class bourgeois women was then changed into a religious magazine reflecting the regime's propaganda on women. The name, Searchers of Zeinab's Path, Fouyandegan-e Rah-e Zeinab, was also added to its name, but later it was renamed Zeinab's Path, Rah-e Zeinab. The magazine began its campaign for the reduction of women's working hours and encouraging women to spend more time at home with their children, as the role of motherhood was praised as their primary function in life.

Rahnavard's view was that the work of a woman outside the home should be reduced to one third of what it currently was so that they would be able to spend more time at home.<sup>20</sup> This was very contradictory to her own position where, with two young children, she was the full-time editor of a weekly magazine and was still prepared to take on public engagements. She also used the magazine to attack Marxist ideology as irrelevant to Iran and as a negative influence of the West while at the same time developing and supporting the ideas of the Hezbollah and theocracy. She wrote a series of articles in the Ettelaat newspaper in July of 1980 around the time of imposition of the compulsory veiling,

under the title of "Colonial Roots in the Abolition of the Hejab".

These articles analysed the situation and the reasons behind Reza Shah's decree of the abolition of veiling in 1926. She dismissed the critics of the hejab either as Westernised, if they identified it as a symbol of reaction and backwardness, or as Marxist, if they believed that economics was the motivation for Reza Shah's decree and who also saw the veil as a feudalist dress to become redundant with the development of capitalism. She dismissed these analyses and put emphasis on particular regional mechanisms. She went on to say that:

In the East, particularly in our country and since the era of Islam, woman has been the source of dignity for the nation. Therefore if this source was disrespected, then the nation's spirit is broken. In the wars, one of the first acts by conquering nations is to rape the womenfolk of the defeated... The colonisers with their programme of forced unveiling pursued the same programme of rape and plunder of our nation except that it was in the 20th century language. The unveiling act was thus an act of undermining our national dignity. It was also to eradicate our identity and Islam... The colonisers, in order to impose their own culture on the country under their domination, first humiliate and belittle the identity of those people... The Muslim woman is a source of this identity, and her hejab is a symbol of her own identity...the Western colonisers through removing the Muslim woman's veil sought victories whose ultimate goal was the warm waters of the Gulf and the rich resources of the East.<sup>21</sup>

So, she concluded that in order to regain this lost wealth, dignity, and identity, women should wear the veil.

...Yes, we can sue the hejab as an anti-colonial weapon against these looters. That is exactly why the planners behind the Shah prevented veiled women's entry into universities and offices. And, that is why the raising of this issue, the wearing of the veil as an anti-colonial dress, although I don't agree with the particular way in which it is done at the moment, has so angered these female servants of America. They protest against it to please their masters. This is precisely the protest of America that is voiced through its internal allies...<sup>22</sup>

#### THE FATE OF PRO-WOMEN'S RIGHTS WOMEN

To a minority of educated, westernised women, the status of women had deteriorated as a consequence of the reforms imposed by the Islamic Republic. This minority, as discussed above, expressed their concerns and protests through demonstrations, basically on three occasions; the

International Women's Day in March 1979, the Conference of Unity in December 1979 and the demonstrations against the imposition of the hejab in June 1980.

The numbers of this pro-women's rights group had decreased a great deal when they were demonstrating, dressed in black, in mourning the loss of their rights, in June 1980. The number of women participants in this demonstration was an estimated 2,500, which is about one quarter of the number of women who participated in the March 1979 demonstrations. Most of these women were professionals and Western educated who preferred a secular form of government. Those among these women who were able to leave the country had already done so. Also as the socio-political environment had become more repressive, the fear of participation in a woman's rights, or any other, demonstration had kept many pro-women's rights elements at home. In fact, those who rallied against the government showed considerable courage. Their demonstrations, as before, were declared illegal and were faced with harassment and threats. A few days later, five women were arrested on charges of intent to organise another pro-women's rights demonstration.<sup>223</sup>

The consequence of this harassment of feminist activists by the Hesbollahi groups backed by the government officials and policies, was the end of the women's rights movement in Iran once more. The newly flourishing women's groups either stopped their activities altogether, or conducted them underground. Those members who had left the country became involved in organising Iranian feminist groups in major cities of Europe and the United States. The activities of these groups basically revolves around consciousness raising about the position of women inside Iran. Though living in democratic atmosphere where they are able to pursue their goal, these women do, however, face tremendous problems of adjustment and functioning in their new environment and this has, in many



cases, hindered their feminist activities, making them of secondary concern. The position of these women is beyond the scope of this research.

#### WOMEN SUPPORTERS OF THE REPUBLIC

It is not an easy task to analyse the position of the rest of the female population under the Islamic Republic. As there is no major survey on this subject, one has to inevitably rely on available evidence and information in theorising the state of mind and views of the majority of traditionalist women who supported and continued to support the Islamic Republic. One thing is evident, however, and that is the fact that the Islamic Republic has lost great numbers of supporters since its establishment. The development of various stages of the Revolution and different events, in particular the war with Iraq, has reduced the number of women supporters of the government.

Women who backed the regime and became propaganda tools for it, came from the most traditional sectors of the society. The majority of them were illiterate and very religious. These women believed that Islam had promoted the status of women thus justified their own position under the Islamic regime. The regime also justified the position of women both in constructing the symbol of an ideal Islamic woman, which portrays the contradictory position of women, and by re-interpreting the Islamic precepts regarding women.<sup>24</sup>

These traditional women, whose activities were limited to the domestic environment, after the revolution, became involved in non-domestic activities by joining local committees. These committees conducted various activities such as literacy classes, Koran reading and interpretation classes, social and welfare work groups, and with the start of the war, they became involved in helping soldiers at the front.

A campaign for a new Islamic socialisation of women also began.

Schools changed their curriculum and Islamic cover became obligatory. Both schools and the local committees encouraged women to take classes to learn the use of weapons and this image of women was emphasised and publicised a great deal. The image of a young woman covered in black Islamic dress, holding a gun in her hand became a very familiar portrait in various state publications. Even a postal stamp was issued with that image. This was the image of a woman symbolising both positions of women; virtuous and veiled yet ready to defend Islam with no fear. In comparison to the Pahlavi era, her active participation in the affairs of society was not in conflict with but in accordance with her morals and the Islamic culture.

These women condemned women's demonstrations of 1979 and 1980 and called them anti-Islamic.<sup>25</sup> They demonstrated in support of the Islamic Republic on various issues, when asked by the officials. As demonstrating on political issues became a daily event and masses were mobilised by government officials, women participated in them very proudly, not only because they were convinced but also because they enjoyed their "adventure" outside the house. Traditionally these women were confined to the boredom and frustrations of their restricted domestic lives. They were not able and eager to become involved in non-domestic affairs, especially if it was approved by the Islamic government and not in conflict with their cultural norms. The government has thus been very successful in exploiting these women's sense of adventure and uses them for its own purposes. A number of these women also took part in demonstrations under pressures of the neighbours. They would be singled out if they did not participate.

THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S POSITION

The contradictory position of women in Islam, the re-interpretation of Islamic precepts and the use of female Shi'ite models have all helped

the government to justify the inferior position of women and in fact make women not recognise it as an inferior position.

The question of the position of women within the structure of the Islamic Republic, however, has become a prominent one and is continuously the subject of discussions by various groups. Different verses of the Koran regarding women have been interpreted in different ways and discussed in different publications. Essays and commentaries have been written in magazines and newspapers. Books on the high position of women in Islam and the position of woman in relation to family and society have been published.

In spite of the justifications of the regime on the position of women within the Islamic Republic, however, women have realised their unequal positions and this has been the subject of debate even in the Majlis, where, as discussed above, women Members of Parliament expressed their concern. Women's magazines also, while justifying the Koranic stand on women's position, very often echoed and acknowledged the suffering of women under domination of men. These very often expressed concern on physical abuse of women. One magazine, for example, described the situation of a young woman, herself a victim of battery by her husband, and her child on the verge of starvation. The article addressed the court officials, asking them for assistance and questioning whether legislation regarding women and the enforcement institutions had really freed women or whether they had only talked about doing it.<sup>26</sup> There were many other examples of this kind in various periodicals and publications.

With the passage of time, national and local repression of women was increased. It was only when the suffering of women, whether pro-government or against it, increased beyond religious and cultural norms that sympathy was raised and the government was criticised by prominent women like Aazam Taleghani, cited above, who subsequently lost

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their jobs and were labelled as "liberals".

The traditional pro-Islam women who justified female oppression as the result of their strong religious feelings, objected to cruelty against women. Their objections came from their own inner conflict. Although these women did not use nor believed in the concept of feminism, they found themselves in a conflict between their ideals of Islam and their knowledge or experience of women's oppression. Many of these women found their solution in joining and supporting the Mojahedin ideology, which they thought, gave more rights to women and allowed more female participation in all action.

The Islamic Republic conducted a systematic repression of the female position in Iran. This repression took place in the form of cultural and religious reforms with women becoming its most affected victims. Under these reforms, national and religious minorities and even the male population have suffered also but not to the degree that women have. The fact that there has been no major objection to this shows that the discriminatory oppression of women is a very acceptable norm. However the question of women's position has now become a prominent issue in all activities of the opposition groups and the hope is that women, after the disappointing experience of the revolution, will voice their own demands alongside the political demands in any future development, and not ignore it as they did previously.

Notes to Chapter 6

1. Details of this demonstration are discussed later.
2. See Chapter 4 on women's position within the Islamic ideology.
3. See Chapter 3 for details of Family Protection Law.
4. New York Times, 1 March 1979, p.A10.
5. "The Unfinished Revolution", Time, 2 April 1979, p.34.
6. For detailed reports see Bidari-ye Zanan (Women's Awakening), nos.3, 4 and 15, Farvardin 1358/March 1979.
7. The activities of the Muslim women's groups will be discussed later.
8. Ettelaat, 8 Aban 1358/30 October 1979.
9. Legal changes regarding women and the position of women in the Constitution of 1979 were discussed in Chapter 5.
10. The difference of ideology among these groups is discussed in Chapter 7.
11. News Bulletin of the Women's Solidarity Council, (Teheran: Shahrivar 1359/September 1980).
12. All these incidents and lashing of unveiled women have been confirmed by women who had recently left Iran during informal interviews I conducted with them, or where I was present when they were giving accounts of incidents they had witnessed themselves to other people.
13. The views of both groups on this are discussed in Chapter 7.
14. For examples of this attitude refer to "Editorial", Jahan-e Zanan (Women's World), no.3, Shahrivar 1359/September 1980.
15. See Chapter 3 for detailed discussions on Women's Organization of Iran.
16. Ettelaat, 1 Khordad 1359/29 May 1981.
17. Ettelaat, 3 February 1982, translated in Azari, Women of Iran, (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), p.213.
18. *Ibid.*, p.214.
19. Ettelaat, 11 Bahman 1960/3 February 1982.
20. Her views were expressed in her proposal to the government for a reform programme for women published in Ettelaat Banovan, no.6, Shahrivar 1359/September 1980.
21. Ettelaat, 7 July 1980, translated in Azari, *op.cit.* p.217.
22. *Ibid.*

23. Enghelab-e Eslami (Islamic Revolution), 2nd year, no.299, 18 Tir 1359/9 July 1980, p.12.
24. Refer to Chapter 4.
25. Rahe-Zeinab, no.17, 27 Aban 1359/1980, pp.18-19.
26. Rahe Zeinab, no.25, 18 Azar 1359/1980, pp.34-35.

## Chapter 7

### THE LEFT AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN

The leftist movement in Iran had started at the beginning of the twentieth century and was very much influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Communist Party of Iran, Hezbe Toudeh enjoyed large mass support and membership in the 1940s and early 1950s. However, it lost most of its membership after the coup d'etat of 1953 when the Shah re-established his dictatorial powers. The Toudeh Party carried on its underground activities with a minimal membership. It was the only leftist group which existed in Iran prior to 1970. The two most popular left wing organizations of Iran today, the Organization of People's Fadayan Guerillas of Iran, Sazeman-e Fadayan-e Khalq-e Iran, and the Organisation of the People's Mojahedin of Iran, Sazeman-e Mojahedin-e Khalq-e Iran, were the result of severe political repression of the Shah's rule and they were both formed around 1970 with major underground guerilla activities.

The left wing movement is therefore a very young movement in Iran and lacks experience because of the severe political repression. However, as the left has traditionally been an ally of liberation movements, the relationship between the left and the women's liberation movement in Iran becomes very important.

This chapter will analyse the ideological position of these leftist groups on the question of women's rights and how these ideological positions have been practised. It will also discuss the beginning of the consciousness towards the question of women among the left in Iran and the acceptance of the idea of independent women's organisations as the avenue towards achieving emancipation for women.

### DEBATE ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE QUESTION OF WOMEN

Both the Fadayan and Mojahedin organisations were guerilla

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organisations which fought in the 1970s in opposition to the Shah's regime. Among their membership, both groups had great numbers of active female members. They both supported the revolution and helped the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran. However, as the Islamic government strengthened its authority they both went once again into opposition to the new regime.

The Mojahedin organisation became very actively a major force opposing the Islamic Republic. The Fadayan, however, split over the issue, into Majority and Minority Fada'i groups. The Majority, together with the Tudeh party, tacitly supported the actions of the government while the Minority, like the Mojahedin, went underground again and became the major leftist group opposing the regime.

From the years 1970 to 1979, the question of women was overshadowed by the more important aim of the opposition to the Shah's dictatorial rule. The argument, not only by the left, but by the whole opposition was that the dictatorship of the Shah should be removed and the problem of Imperialism and democracy solved before the question of women could even be considered. Even women members of these organisations shared this view and although both men and women agreed with the principle of the equality of the sexes, any discussions of the material roots that caused women's oppression and questioned the role of women within the family was always ignored during the 1970s. Among the pre-revolutionary publications of the two organisations of the Fadayan and the Mojahedin there was no mention of women's oppression.

Many women participated in the activities of these organisations. Most of such women came from a middle class background, among them many students, teachers, professionals, mothers, and workers. Many were captured, tortured and killed by SAVAK. Most of these women, however, were against the idea of feminism and along with their male comrades, saw



feminist issues as diversionary for the mass movement. Women with communist ideas took to wearing the chador willingly, to identify with the masses. At the time, they did not see that Islam, which advocated the veil, would become the dominant ideology as an Islamic take-over was not seen as a serious threat. Questions about the position of women, should Islamic leaders come to power, were dismissed as bourgeois feminism and liberalism. They saw the solution to women's oppression in a basic change of the structure of society from capitalism to socialism.

The experience of the Revolution and the severe repressive measures that the Islamic Republic government took against women - whether justifiable by cultural values or economic crisis - created a consciousness about the women's issue among the progressive and leftist groups. Some Marxist groups even criticised themselves for having ignored this issue. However, the debate about the relevance or irrelevance of the women's question to the whole progressive political movement is still the dominant issue. Even some women affiliated to the progressive movement still have their doubts about the importance of the independent women's movement to the movement as a whole.

The idea against the independent organisation of women is prevalent from an interview with famous writer and historian Homan Nategh, a supporter of the Fadayan. The following quotes demonstrate a summary of this argument:

Women's organisation can only be meaningful if its goal is towards organising the masses for struggle for the cause of the progressive forces. A democratic struggle around the women's question is necessary but it is not adequate for solving the question. If women organise themselves only around this issue, in order to avoid any clash of ideas and beliefs, they will have to come up with slogans such as "child care centres" and "equal pay" and stop there. Instead of understanding and analysing the ruling system, with lack of consciousness and cleverness, they will have to compromise. The slogan for "child care" is as important as the slogan for "councils" and has to be included in the political programme of all the political parties and not that of women... In other words, the right guidance should come from the progressive groups and not from Independent groups.<sup>1</sup>

However, Homan Nategh, in the same interview, contradicts herself by saying:

But we should admit that it is seen that among the progressive elements, because of lack of attention to the question of women and family, all the ideological effort is used in the political arena but it is forgotten in personal life. For example, slogans are against the economic system of capitalism but there is no struggle against the capitalist culture within the economic system. If we are fighting against the corporations, consumer society, sex discrimination, and the relationship between the ruling class and the ruled, we will have to also struggle for abolition and modification of the basis of this relationship. These should not be ignored... If we accept that the capitalist system and the dominant traditional culture are among factors that have led women towards oppression and ignorance, then we will have to organise women against these norms and this culture.<sup>2</sup>

The above quotations show the confusion that dominates the ideology of the leftist groups in relation to the question of women.

THE FADAYAN

The organisation of the Fadayan Guerillas of Iran, was formed in 1971 as a result of the merging of three different leftist underground groups in Iran.<sup>3</sup> This organisation played an important part in the support of the revolution of 1979 and continued to support the Islamic Republic of Iran after its establishment in February 1979.

As mentioned earlier, however, disagreement among the leadership, in 1980, over the support of the policies of the Islamic Republic, split the organisation into the Minority, Aghaliyat, which broke away in opposition to the regime and the Majority, Aksariyat which continued together with the Communist Party of Iran, Hezbe Toude-ye Iran, to support the Islamic Republic. When discussing the attitude of the Fadayan towards the question of women, it is the attitude of the Majority Fadayan which will be discussed here.

Like the majority of the leftist organisations in Iran, from the time of its coalition in 1971, the Fadayan organisation did not adopt a strong position on the issue of women's rights. They adopted the

classical attitude of the left in a world that identified the oppression of women only in class terms and saw women's emancipation only as an outcome of the destruction of the class system. Their argument was summed up in the discussion that socialism, and only socialism, would automatically solve the question of women and restore their rights to them. They never expressed their stand on women in terms of specific issues, either before or after the Revolution and dismissed the idea of any independent and outspoken feminist view inside or outside their organisation.

The Fadayan stated that the rights of women were not different from those of men; both men and women were affected by political and economic conditions; both male and female anti-Shah activists have suffered torture by the SAVAK with no discrimination because of their sex. These arguments are all valid. It is true that the class background of women affects some of their rights. Upper class women are usually economically better off in terms of shelter and food and clothing and do not have to struggle to find a low paying job and work in appalling conditions in order to survive and support their families. Lower class women are affected most by issues such as hygiene and disease with issues such as early and forced marriages affecting women of all classes. These are facts that relate sex and class on the general conditions of human existence and thus strengthen the relationship between sex and class.

The Fadayan, on this issue have followed the majority of the leftist movements in the world and view sexual discrimination only in the context of class relationship. They have ignored the fact that this traditional way of viewing the women's question has been challenged by Western feminists much more than by women in the third world. In spite of the existing ties between socialism and feminism, these are not the same. Socialist feminists argue that the rise and taking of power by the

working class will not necessarily bring about the rise of women and to think so is to completely ignore the cultural elements of patriarchy and the process of the rigid socialisation of women throughout history. These are elements that give a special dimension to the position of women. They are elements which demonstrate how women are discriminated against not just on the class basis but on the basis of sex as well. A working class woman for example, is not only exploited as a worker within the capitalist and class system, but she is at the same time exploited also as a female, even by the male workers of her own class. Socialist feminists, therefore, argue that a socialist revolutionary stand without a feminist stand is not Marxism.

The prevalent notion that the struggle for the women's liberation is "secondary" to that for proletarian revolution, meaning not only dependent but also comparatively unimportant, is not Marxism but mechanical materialism.<sup>4</sup>

Following the Revolution, any endeavours by women on their struggle for their rights were denounced by the Fadayan who refused to support them. When Khomeini announced that women government employees should wear the Islamic hajib, women came out on the streets of Teheran by the thousands to demonstrate against this compulsory law. During a five day demonstration, women also voiced other demands, including equal pay for equal work, the right of choice for their clothes and the preservation of the Family Protection Law and to have a greater voice in the government.<sup>5</sup> None of these demands were based on class, however, the Fadayan denounced the demonstrations and accused the demonstrating women of being anti-revolutionary, pro-Shah and bourgeois. Also in December 1979, the Fadayan organised a demonstration on the same day that various women's groups had organised a conference of the Solidarity of Women thus diverting the attention of many people including their own female membership away from the women's conference. The Islamic fundamentalists on the other hand cut off the electricity of the building in order to

disrupt the conference. Nevertheless, the conference continued by candle-light.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of such opportunistic behaviour by the Fadayan, the Fadayan have criticised the repressive policies of the Islamic Republic with regard to women and have admitted that the status of women has deteriorated and the government has not paid attention to women's rights.<sup>7</sup> Their hope, however, is that the continuation of the revolutionary process will result in the decreased role of imperialism which in turn brings better general conditions for the masses and that this will elevate the position of women.<sup>8</sup> They nevertheless urged their female membership to observe the hejab and dress moderately as a sign of respect to the revolution and the masses.

With the outbreak and continuation of the war between Iran and Iraq in 1980, the Fadayan publications glorified women's heroism and sacrifice. Mothers whose sons were lost in the war were referred to as "great heroines". The heroism of women also included sewing clothes for the soldiers and encouraging them to fight in the war against Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

Sanasarian attributes the stereotypes and contradictions inherent in the Fadayan organisation's position on women's rights to a male dominated upper class leadership cadre (typical of leftist groups worldwide), "who have certainly read Marx but have failed to shake off their paternalistic sense of superiority towards the female sex."<sup>10</sup> Women who have joined these organisations have also adopted the same views although there have been times when some of them have felt a conflict between themselves, their needs and desires and the organisation's stand. However, they all felt that the rights they lost under the Islamic Republic were not important in the face of more important threats to the whole nation, such as the fight with Imperialism and the war with Iraq. Most of these women are not religious and do not see women's liberation as being inherent in

Islam, as they thought of Islam as a repressive rather than a liberating force, yet they are opposed to any organised independent activity for liberating women. They also, like their male comrades, argue that the pursuit of women's issues is damaging to the cause of the revolution.

Fadayan women admit that most of their meetings are dominated by their male partners and confess their feelings of inferiority in knowledge and ability to their male partners.<sup>11</sup> The idea of inferiority is internalised by these educated and "conscious" women and the Fadayan has not attempted to alter the situation by encouraging women to participate more and to at least talk about the subject of which they are more knowledgeable, the issue of women. Quite the opposite, by projecting the cultural view of "women as second-class citizens under the cover of leftist ideology, female insecurities have been reinforced.

#### THE MOJAHEDIN

The Organisation of the People's Mojahedin of Iran, although founded in the 1960s, did not operate as a guerilla group until the year 1971. The ideology of the Mojahedin is based on an Islamic ideology, influenced by Marxism and interpreted in Marxist terms. This Marxist interpretation of the Koran provides ideological flexibility for the Mojahedin, enabling them to deal with practical situations. As Abrahamian put it, their intention was to break the monopoly of the clergy over religion and "to develop a new Islam that would synthesise European socialism with the progressive ideas of early Shi'ism and the advantages of their own traditional society."<sup>12</sup>

Because of their adherence to an Islamic ideology, and their link with the so-called "national Bourgeoisie", for example Bani Sadr, many leftists consider them not revolutionary Marxists but militant reformists. However, although the basis of Mojahedin's ideology was Islamic, its revolutionary interpretation of Islam produced an ideology

similar to that of the Fadayan.<sup>13</sup> In 1975, the organisation was voted to be Marxist Leninist and in their Manifesto on Ideological Issues, they declared that Islam was the "ideology of the middle class" whereas marxism was the "salvation of the working class".<sup>14</sup>

From the beginning of the revolution in 1979, the Mojahedin found themselves increasingly in conflict with the new Islamic government. They had suggested the addition of fourteen points to the new Constitution, one of which was the full Islamic equality of men and women. They refused to support the Constitution when none of their points were accepted.

Their subsequent disillusionment with Khomeini's regime changed them from being his strong supporters to becoming his most organised and potent enemy. Politically, they were successful and enjoyed a huge membership from the traditional classes.

The Mojahedin had shown a more progressive view than the traditionalists on the position of women. They seemed, from the beginning, to be very aware of the importance of this issue and instead of ignoring it, like other leftist groups, the issue of women's rights became a prominent issue which was continuously addressed in their publications. In their programme of national Council of Resistance, Shoraye Moqavemat-e Melli, their proposal for transitional government, equal rights for women was mentioned in a separate clause.<sup>15</sup>

The Mojahedin very clearly recognised women as a revolutionary force and argued that since women constitute half of the population of every society, without their participation, no revolution would succeed. However, they argue that the position of women as second-class citizens will not change with minor legal changes such as the right to divorce and so on, but the whole social, economic, political and cultural structure needs to change in order for the status of women to change. They argue

that women, in all these spheres of society, have been viewed and judged by their sexuality rather than their personality as human beings, and that this approach has created stereotypes of women as wives and mothers and has eliminated them from social and political activities. The liberation of women would only come about by the restructuring of various traditional relations and even men's thoughts have to undergo a fundamental change. The Mojahedin views the confinement of women to the family sphere as enslavement to her husband. However, they argue that capitalism encourages women to enter the market only to be further exploited and it prevents them from entering the society.<sup>16</sup>

These views of the Mojahedin on women appear to be very progressive. However, the Mojahedin woman's position is very ambiguous. The Mojahedin have strongly advised the observation of the Hejab as very essential for the "preservation of the moral health of the society". They seem to follow Mottahari's view on this issue. Their rationale behind the usage of the hejab, is that in a society based on class relationships, women have been judged on the basis of their sexuality and have been exploited as sex objects. Women should wear the hejab, the scarf and modest clothing, in order to change this outlook and to restore the health of society. They nevertheless object to the forced veiling of women by the Islamic Republic as illogical.<sup>17</sup>

The Mojahedin also heavily rely on the Koran and on Islam. The ambiguous position of women in both the Koran and Islamic interpretations have been discussed in previous chapters. Their compromise between socialism and Islam is very puzzling and confusing. In linking the two ideologies, they follow Shariati's views discussed earlier.<sup>18</sup> However, Shariati's arguments with regard to the position of women and their role in society, are not as clear as his arguments on socio-political issues. They contain contradictions and ambiguities which the Mojahedin are now



inevitably facing. These are inherent in their interpretation of the Koran regarding women; they clearly emphasise the verses in favour of women and addressed to the "masses" and ignore the ones that deny certain rights to women, for example on inheritance and witnessing.<sup>17</sup>

Like the Fadayan, the Mojahedin also refused to back the women's demonstrations of March 1979 and the women's conference of December 1979. They too, considered the question of women not the main question, although a major issue at the time, the main issue was the fight with imperialism.<sup>20</sup>

The Mojahedin have enjoyed their popular base and support mainly among the traditional middle class and the bazaar population. They were the first major pro-revolutionary group to announce their opposition to the Islamic Republic of Khomeini and thus became targets of the attacks of the regime. Subsequently, they lost thousands of their members who were arrested, tortured, and executed by the officials of the Islamic Republic, among them great numbers of female members and their family members as young as nine year old girls. These women not only did not receive any reduction in their punishment because of their sex, they have been subject to the most violent treatment such as rape of the virgin girls by the revolutionary guards because in Islam a virgin girl who dies is considered pure and goes to heaven, so virgin Mojahedin girls were raped prior to their execution to prevent their souls from entering heaven.

Martyrdom thus became a form of glory for the Mojahedin who lost their lives for the cause of the movement. The concept of martyrdom is part of the Iranian Shi'ite culture and creates a bond between the members of a group. In Mojahedin publications, one very often comes across the expression of great desire by the Mojahedin members, and in particular the young female members, for becoming a martyr, a desire for

death.<sup>24</sup> To become a martyr sometimes seems to be an end in itself rather than the means. It is as important as victory and "freedom". Perhaps this desire and fantasizing about martyrdom by young women is related to the political role of women.<sup>25</sup> The upbringing of these women turns them into very submissive beings to their menfolk and thus they become very dedicated followers, loyal to the cause of the organisation and ready to sacrifice for the cause. Their sacrifice for God and the masses is encouraged by their ideology and their upbringing as well as by the leadership of the Mojahedin who glorify martyrdom and the death of their young followers.

The claim to martyrdom by Mojahedin members is denied and refuted by the rulers of the Islamic government, for whom martyrdom is a natural means of dying for Islam. Only dying in the path of God qualifies one for martyrdom. Thus the Mojahedin, opposed to the Islamic Republic, are denied martyrdom by their opposition, and their deaths are thus not martyrs' deaths.

FAILURE OF THE LEFT IN RECRUITING WOMEN

We see that there are both similarities and differences between the Fadayan and the Mojahedin approach to the position of women. Until recently both organisations have been run by male leadership with no women in decision-making positions. The Mojahedin, however, "promoted" a woman to a leadership position in 1985. This will be discussed later.

Both groups regard women as a revolutionary force and their women participated very actively for the revolution but after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Fadayan's pro-government stand was very detrimental to the role of their women and their role was reduced to the distribution of leaflets and performing inessential services rather than entering and participating in decision-making roles.

The idea of a separate movement for women's rights was rejected by

both groups, as both thought these rights were not separate from the overall rights of the masses. The Mojahedin, however, acknowledged the women's question and have addressed the issue in detail in their publications. Their leadership refers to the importance of women's rights yet does not see the improvement of the conditions and position of women in Iran to be based on female initiated groups or activities. The Fadayan on the other hand never addressed the issue in detail but proclaimed Marx's views on the issue. The Mojahedin's view reflects the Iranian Islamic cultural view of the traditional classes whereas the Fadayan's stand on the women's issue reflects a more hypocritical and opportunistic view, they admit that the Islamic Republic government under the leadership of Khomeini has repressed women's rights, yet in spite of their revolutionary claims, they have not taken a public measure against it.

The Mojahedin form a major opposition to the Islamic Republic and inevitably, the Mojahedin women are taken very seriously as a revolutionary force. This revolutionary role has allowed some of these women to operate very actively, while separated from their male partners and husbands, thus obtaining a separate identity and freedom. These women have become models for the Mojahedin women. An example is Ashraf Rabi'i, the wife of Mas'oud Rajavi, the leader of the Mojahedin. She had been a active member of the group since the early 1970s and had been arrested and tortured many times by SAVAK. After the opposition of the Mojahedin with the Islamic Republic government, when her husband left for Paris, she stayed behind in Teheran to continue her activities and she played an important role in arranging the flight of ex-President Bani Sadr from Iran. She was killed (martyred) in February 1982 in an ambush by the government forces. The Mojahedin women talk about their organisation with awareness, respect, confidence, and knowledge. The endorsement of the Islamic traditional ideology together with the modern

socialist ideology creates a psychological compromise for Iranian women. Although this appears to be very contradictory, to a traditional-minded Iranian woman who is educated and aware of the requirements of modern times, this compromise solves the problem of contradictions. This might be the reason for the loyalty and confidence of the Mojahedin women.

The Fadayan women, on the other hand, acknowledged that their rights have been repressed by the Islamic Republic and thus they resented Islam yet at the same time they felt obliged to compromise and support the Islamic Republic because their organisation supported it. This contradiction might have been suppressed in their subconscious but their confession about the position of women within their organisation is demonstrated through the attitudes and behaviour. Subsequently many of their members have left the organisation to join the Iranian independent women's groups which have been formed within Iran and abroad.

#### THE LEFT AND THE CONCEPT OF BOURGEOIS FEMINISM

Since the very first month of the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran and its attacks on the rights of women, Iranian women have, on many occasions, protested against the legal reforms and restrictions imposed on them and have demonstrated demanding their rights.<sup>23</sup> These demonstrations and demands were totally ignored by the left and there was no mention of these protests in the leftist groups' publications. They showed reluctance to support the fight of women against compulsory veiling. Perhaps it was too soon for the inexperienced leftist movement to see the compulsory veiling of women by the new authorities as a revealing symbol of the nature of the new emancipation had been published in most leftist groups' publications without presenting specific programmes concerning the improvement of the position of women. It seems that the inclusion of general support for women's emancipation and expressing support for their equality was aimed

more at recruiting female members rather than being a serious commitment many potential female members. The development of an independent women's movement was thought to be divisive to the general movement before the revolution, to the general anti-Shah movement and after the revolution, to the workers' movement.

The events of 8 March 1979, when women protested against the compulsory veiling however, triggered a move by the left. Immediately after the events, various leftist groups published pamphlets and articles in their respective publications, all dismissing these events and any idea of dealing with the women's question at the time. The weekly paper of the Fadayan, Kar, printed an article typical of the argument of the left:

Freedom is a humanitarian goal which is not determined by sex... Dividing society into two parts; men and women, so as to make the cultural struggle as a main issue, or to place men and women on opposite sides, is to go astray and is a deviation from the main path... Women's freedom is possible only through class freedom and the participation of women in struggles...to cause false agitation among women is a conspiracy and is a policy adopted by reaction and imperialism to deprive our people's struggling forces. What actually distinguishes men and women is not their appearance but their class status and their being revolutionaries.<sup>24</sup>

The writer of the article, however, admits that the position of women has been extensively lowered during the course of history and that the rights and personal freedom of women have been denied. Then, referring to "the years of dictatorship", it continues to argue that under the cultural oppression women have been "practically dismissed from economic, social, and political life" and that the equal rights of men and women in these spheres must be restored.<sup>25</sup> Again, and very typically, the article rails to mention specifics about how this equality of rights is to be restored. It not only does not put forward any solutions towards solving the problem of inequality, while admitting it, it also criticises those who attempted to find the solution and fought for it.

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The unsympathetic attitude of the left towards the question of the women's movement is not just specific to the Iranian case. Women in other countries have also experienced these hostile attitudes rather than sympathy from the leftist movements in their countries. The example of Chilean women is a typical one when women demonstrators demanding their rights were accused of being "bourgeois women" who helped the success of the coup d'etat in Chile. These examples were used by the left in Iran to discredit the women's movements.<sup>26</sup>

However, in most of their publications, the left continued to glorify the role women played alongside men in the popular movement, perhaps in an effort to show that there was no immediate need for the tackling of the women's cause:

The continuing struggle of Iranian women is not exclusive to the present time... Iranian women have always shown that they have nothing less than other individuals... They have raised their fists against mercenaries just like their brothers.<sup>27</sup>

As Soraya Afshar notes, the fact is that women did not participate in these struggles "just like their brothers" for the simple reason that they were sexually oppressed by them.<sup>28</sup>

The emphasis and the glorification of the role of women in the history of Iran and in the popular movements, is not done just by the leftist groups. The intelligentsia of the Islamic Republic have also considered the role of women in society as essential. They have even gone further than the left in that the leaders and the publications of the regime not only praise and glorify women's participation in the revolution but also propose alternative roles for them in the new society created by the Islamic Republic. In response to popular pressure, in the first few years after the revolution, the regime has been very quick in using the opportunity that the women's movement had offered them to recruit and rally the support of a larger number of women. The result was the formation of Muslim women's movements discussed earlier.<sup>29</sup>

The left, on the other hand, has been obsessed with the dangers of bourgeois feminist movements which included those women fighting against the regime's harsh measures, such as those who protested against the compulsory veiling of women and women judges who tried to re-establish their rights to their professions. For the left, these problems did not concern the working class women but were problems of bourgeois feminism which was developing in post-revolutionary Iran and equated it with the concept it had from the women's movement under the previous regime. It failed to realise that the "dolls", "prostitutes" and "agents of imperialism" were long gone and were replaced by extreme Islamic feminists who proposed part-time work for working women in order to enable them to manage their more important role of running a decent home.<sup>30</sup> The left was too obsessed with its anti-imperialist moves which did not see any danger in these propositions, these issues were considered not worthy of consideration at all.

What the left also ignored or failed to grasp was that the majority of women in Iran had experienced a male dominated culture and thus been exploited doubly. They had seen the opportunity of the revolution as a search for a new identity and it made no difference to them whether their role in the revolution was glorified or their oppression in society was acknowledged by quotations from Marx and Lenin or Khomeini and Shariati. They expected any ruling regime to offer them a path to a future free from traditional exploitation and a specific programme of action towards achieving this goal.

#### SEXUALITY AND THE LEFT

Another area of negligence by the left with regard to the question of women was their total reluctance to discuss the very relevant issue of sexuality. Perhaps this was because classical Marxist literature, while talking about double exploitation of women, ignores the issue of

sexuality. The leftist movements in the West and in the Christian world could afford to ignore the issue because the Christian tradition and the church encouraged and promoted asexuality while the Marxists had a relaxed attitude towards sex. In an Islamic society however, and in particular under the Islamic Republic of Iran, the question of sexuality is very central. Islam not only does not promote asexuality, it encourages and discusses in detail, all forms of sexuality within the framework of marriage. Ignoring the issue has put the left in a disadvantaged position.

Muslim ideologues in Iran today, while admitting the need for sex, advocate a family structure that places female sexuality at the service of male supremacy and control. The left on the other hand, since the revolution, has been intimidated by the prevailing Islamic beliefs and thus isolated on the issue. They have denied the relevance of sexuality and considered any discussion on the subject as diversionary to the cause, thus allowing the Islamic regime to reinforce its ideology and strict sexual codes created by an extremely authoritarian society.

#### THE MOJAHEDIN LEADERSHIP AND WOMEN'S POSITION

A comparison of the Fadayan and the Mojahedin's position on the question of women leads to the conclusion that both groups have, until recently, been led by men and their policies towards women have been defined exclusively in masculine terms. Although the present leadership of the Mojahedin includes a female, it still reflects the views of the Islamic culture which is dominated by masculine power and supremacy. The status of the female is defined in terms dictated by males.

The obsession of both groups with the concept of bourgeois feminism has been a setback for the cause of women's consciousness and the women's movement. While the Fadayan completely ignores the issues of sexuality and the veil, the Mojahedin take up the issue yet they deal with it again



only within the framework of Islamic and traditionalist ideas which are not progressive towards the question of women.

The Mojahedin's disillusionment with Khomeini's regime has gradually improved their position on the women's question within their own ideology. The promotion of a woman, Maryam Azodanlou, to a leadership position is, itself, a departure from the traditional Islamic idea that forbids positions of leadership for women. However, the very nature of the Mojahedin leadership which made it possible for one female member of the group to be promoted to the leadership position on the condition of divorcing her husband, Mehdi Abrishamchi, and marrying the leader, Mas'oud Rajavi, is proof of the terms dictated by men and the domination of masculine culture and power. Therefore, even the Mojahedin, with a woman in a co-leadership position, does not have, and cannot have, a feminist oriented group to safeguard the rights of women in any future development. The rights of women are already defined and the co-leadership of Maryam is the ultimate example of this. The interesting and important point is that Maryam cannot be a model of encouragement for the Mojahedin women. Her promotion is very exceptional and one of its kind as it is specifically declared by the Mojadhedin leadership that ordinary female members cannot obtain this position through marrying the leader. While introducing the new leadership and justifying the necessity of the wedding, they announced that:

The necessity of total strength and continuity of the new leadership in a way which enables it to fulfil all ideological, organisational, social and political expectations, requires the maximum unity between Maryam and Mas'oud at the position of leadership of the New Revolution, and therefore this necessitates their marriage and mahramyat\*. Of course, such organisational and family unity is only relevant and possible at the level of leadership of the organisation, therefore it absolutely cannot be repeated or copied at any other level in the organisational hierarchy.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, the separation of Maryam from her husband, in order for her to marry Mas'oud Rajavi, was an "ideological, organisational, and

social necessity", yet if Mas'oud was married to another woman, it would be impossible for him to divorce his wife and marry Maryam. Also any hope for an ordinary Mojahedin woman to gain a political leadership position, even through marriage, is wiped away plunging her more into her wishes for martyrdom and death.

#### THE TRANSFORMED ATTITUDE OF THE LEFT

The events of March and December of 1979 and the regime's continuous attacks on the rights and integrity of women during that year and the following year and the left's failure to respond to this in time, initiated a change in their attitude and support of the new regime. It now became clear to most supporters of the leftist movement in Iran that the question of women in Iran was a complicated issue, and one which deserved a different approach than mainly being left as the women's groups affiliated to this party or that group.

The failure of the left in that period on all democratic fronts forced them to re-evaluate their policies in general. This inevitably led to various splits among the left. Various leftist groups emerged with adjusted policies to the demands of the social strata they represented. This, on the whole, had meant a different and clearer approach to the question of women. In general, the agenda of almost all of the leftist groups in one way or another included a phrase "equal rights for women". However, what was meant by "equal rights" was not clear and the majority of cases did not offer specific programmes towards achieving this. There were, on the other hand, a minority of leftist and intellectual groups who had supported an independent and autonomous women's movement and had proposed progressive alternatives.

What is being discussed here is the general attitude adopted by the majority of the leftist supporters. There were, however, small minority groups who had shown concern right from the early stages of the

revolution. For example, a small group of women called Raha'i, which was the women's branch of the Organisation of Communist Unity, Sazeman-e Vahdat-e Komonisti, was one of the women's groups that immediately and very actively opposed Khomeini's reforms on women. They opposed the Islamic Constitution, the imposition of the dress code, the dismissal of working women and repressive legislation against women.<sup>32</sup> In spite of the voicing of their objections to the new government, however, these women also believed, like their main organisation, that the true liberation of women was not separated from the democratic liberation of the working class. The major difference of this group with other leftist sympathisers was that they believed in the formation of a separate women's group to facilitate women's liberation in accordance with socialist ideology. To them the separate women's group was to be used for expression of the needs of the oppressed women.

The idea of an independent, autonomous women's organisation which had been so much resisted by the left, had started to come about around 1979. The idea, however, was presented and justified still within the prevailing social and family values. An article written by the Peykar Organisation illustrates this:

...It is true that women should never fight for freedom separate from men...but we should not forget that women from the point of view of their thoughts about society have been kept backward. Therefore [they] have always been unable to understand problems and have found out about them always later than men do and for this reason get their rights later as well... Conscious women should try hard to bring the consciousness of other women to the level of men's... [because] a backward woman is never able to understand the idea of her militant husband, father or brother and the more conscious the woman, the warmer the circle of the family.<sup>33</sup>

It was very easy for feminists to dismiss such articles as male chauvinistic but what should be noted here, as Soraya Afshar has, is that the authors of such articles were trying not only to convince themselves on the issue of a separate movement for women, but their main goal was to convince their audience, the working class men, to let their women

participate in separate women's activities.<sup>34</sup> They realised that this was a very crucial step in developing a consciousness about women's questions.

The Tudeh Party, the most experienced leftist organisation in Iran which existed long before the revolutionary upheaval, had formed its organisation, the Women's Democratic Organisation of Iran, Tashkilat-e Demokratic-e Zanan-e Iran, which had formulated a programme regarding women.<sup>35</sup> However, the Tudeh Party, after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, as part of a very desperate attempt to establish itself alongside an anti-communist Islamic Regime, had to compromise, as it did in 1953, over many political issues with the new regime. The women's issue was one that had to suffer as a result of this compromising. The women's organisation of the Tudeh Party not only suppressed the issue but following others, even started to praise the "sacrifice" of Iranian women in "not giving priority" to their own rights and for "holding the rights of a nation higher and more important than their own".<sup>36</sup> The general programme of this organisation, however, included equality in its general position of women within society and the family. These included equal pay for equal work, equal opportunity for education and a few more specific demands for nurseries and kindergartens. The Socialist Workers' Party, Hezb-e Kargaran-e Socialist was the only leftist group to include abortion rights among other demands for women in its program.<sup>37</sup>

The summer of 1980 saw the start of a re-evaluation and self-criticism among the left. The Fadayan group split into the "Majority" and the "Minority" groups. The stand of the majority has been explained in detail. Together with the Hezbe Tudeh, they supported the regime and helped it to crush any opposition groups and popular movements including other leftist groups and the Kurds. The Minority, however, preserved its revolutionary stands towards the question of women. The

Minority Fadayan, published a special edition of their organ Kar in 1981 to commemorate the International Women's Day. This in itself was a sign of hope that at least one major leftist organisation in Iran has taken the question of women's rights seriously by saying, "The democratic and independent struggle for women at this stage is a necessity."<sup>39</sup>

Another article in the same issue expressed regret and criticism towards progressive organisations for their lack of support in the previous two years since the revolution for women protesters and their activities, such as the protest by women lawyers and other women's organisations against losing their profession as judges. They admitted that these protests failed because these women were not supported by the progressive political groups and organisations.

This different approach by the more progressive groups among the left in Iran, was the sign of sympathy and understanding towards the women's question and the absence of unnecessary praise of women for their "sacrifice", was a spark of hope for the confused Iranian women among the left, torn between two conflicting necessities of either supporting the left as the only option and compromise with their policies, or to state their own feminist demands. The conflict seemed slowly to be dissolving.

#### WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS WITHIN THE LEFT

The non-supportive attitude adopted by the leftist and progressive organisations in Iran towards the question of women and women's struggles for equal rights, has been in great conflict with the experiences of the women active within these organisations. The majority of the leftist women who were active in the formation of various groups who took part in demonstrations, conferences and sit-ins, were middle class women supportive or sympathetic to the leftist ideology and not from working class backgrounds. Their protests, however, were not supported by the leftist organisations on the pretext that because these women were middle

class women their movement was a middle class women's movement and therefore its support was not their concern.

Originally, many women from among these groups realised, as pressure started to build up, that in order for them to be able to raise consciousness among the working class women, they themselves had to be aware of social restrictions. Their activities were hindered further by legalisation of these restrictions by the Islamic government. Thus many women's organisations affiliated to various leftist groups either dissolved or became inactive.

There were a great number of leftist women who themselves adopted the non-supportive attitude towards the women's question and this has been a great hindrance in promoting the cause of women among the leftist organisations. As discussed above, their main goal was to "liberate" the society, rather than just one part of it. Most of these women, however, were well aware of, or had a theoretical understanding of the need to organise working class women. This has been emphasised by classical socialists concerned with women's problems<sup>39</sup> whose views were widely quoted by the members of these organisations. In fact, this theoretical understanding of the need to organise women has been behind the formation of various women's groups affiliated with leftist groups. These women's groups were nevertheless caught between the lack of real interest and commitment to the question of women as women and not as workers, on the one hand, and the inter-party rivalry that existed within these organisations. This unfortunately led to the disappearance of these women's groups. It was only those groups who made an effort to become independent, like Ettehade Melli-ye Zan, the National Women's Alliance, and Raha'i-ye Zan, Women's Emancipation, who survived during the first few years of the revolution.

Since then, however, those women who had ignored their own

womanhood, thanks to the pressure of the Islamic Republic, have been forced to re-evaluate their thoughts and look at themselves as middle class urban women rather than as workers or peasants. Leftist women's organisations, in addition to the reactionary legislation and restrictions, also had to challenge the Muslim women's organisations. These groups not only have their own ideologues<sup>49</sup>, but also enjoy (the) government support and funds. Iranian working class women have been easily recruited by them. A great number of Iranian middle class women also, in search of their identity and culture, have been attracted to the ideas promoted by these groups. Iranian leftist woman has realised that she has to be prepared to respond to these ideas. Her response has to be a practical alternative acceptable to the masses rather than intellectual discussions that alienate them.

Since all the progressive movements were banned, the activities of the newly formed independent women's groups also went underground and many members left Iran. However, right from the first year of the revolution, independent Iranian women's groups have formed abroad and still continue in various forms throughout the Western world. These groups continuously evaluate and re-evaluate their own position vis-a-vis the Islamic Republic and try to keep their contact with their partners in Iran. Abroad, they have the freedom to exercise their rights and at least express their ideas in the form of publications, seminars and group meetings. This in itself is very promising for the future when most of these women return to Iran and continue their cause.

The replacement of the Islamic Republic by any other government, in particular a socialist one, would require reforms that would improve women's position considerably. In spite of the shortcomings of both the Mojahedin and the Fadayan in their approach to the question of women, in a future government in Iran, no matter which group obtains

decision-making power, the position of women will have to improve. As the women's rights under the Islamic Republic have been repressed very severely, any group that comes to power is obliged to support legal changes in favour of women. However, these changes will not be very profound, or easy considering the male dominated leadership of political movements and the culturally reinforced socialisation of women within these groups.

Like the liberation of the workers, the liberation of women is a cause in its own right. It requires consciousness raising and an active movement of its own. This is only possible through independent women's movements which start with consciousness raising and its aim is much higher than equality between man and woman.



Notes to Chapter 7

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13. For detailed discussions of this see E. Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp.492-495.
14. Ibid.
15. Shoraye Moghavemat-e Melli, (National Council of Resistance) Program of the Transitional Government of the Democratic Islamic Republic, (n.p., 1981).
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18. Refer to Chapter 4.

19. Sazeman-e Mojahedin-e Khalgh-e Iran, Zan Dar Masir-e Raha'i (Women on the Road to emancipation), pp.14-16.
20. Fred Haliday, "Interviews", MERIP Reports, no.86, 1980, p.19. X
21. For a discussion of this issue refer to F. San'atkar, "Ezdevaiha-ye Siyasi-ye Mojahedin" (Political Marriages of the Mojahedin), Nime-ye Digar, nos.3 and 4, Winter 1364, 1987, pp.10-33.
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23. For details refer to Chapter 6.
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29. Refer to Chapter 6.
30. Fereshteh Hashemi, "Barname-ye Kar-e Nime Vaght Baraye Zanan-e Karmand" (Part-time Work Plan for Working Women), Zan-e Rouz, no.780, 1980, p.14. See also Zahra Rahnavard's proposal discussed in Chapter 6.
31. "Communique from the Political Office of the Mojahedin", Mojahed, no.241, p.26.
32. Raha'i, Bahman 1358/1980, p.17.
33. Peykar Organisation, op.cit.
34. Afshar, op.cit., p.162.
35. Refer to Chapter 2.
36. Hezbe Toudeh-ye Iran, Tashkilat-e Demokratik-e Zanan, Naghsh-e Zan Dar Enghelab (The Role of Women in the Revolution), 1980.
37. Hezbe Kargaran-e Socialist, Socialist Workers' Party, Barname-ye Annale Zahmat-Keshan, (The Toilers' Program), 1979.

38. Kar, International Women's Day Special Edition, "Bar-resi-ye Koutahi Az Do Sal Mobareze-ye Demokratik Baraye Zanar", (A Short Analysis of the Two Year Democratic Struggle for Women), 8 March 1981, p.6.
39. Examples of these socialists are Engles, Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai and Rosa Luxembourg. ~ X
40. Refer to Chapter 6.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

The question of women in twentieth century Iran has been a very controversial political issue within Iran. The women's movements of the 1920s in Iran had raised the issues concerning women. This movement was stopped at its early stages of growth, yet a minority of upper class conscious feminists represented the voice and the rising demands of the majority. The years of the coercive Pahlavi regime brought about some educational and legal reforms in favour of women. This was a period of non-movement for women yet a period of success for the middle class and educated women as women's status had improved to not only allow them to participate in the economic and industrial development of the country but they could also be appointed to high political positions of lawyers, members of parliament, ministers and the highest would be the appointment of the Queen to the position of Nayebol-Saltane.

In comparison, Khomeini rule has systematically deprived women of the educational, legal, social, economic, and political status that women had achieved, although through reforms from above, throughout the Pahlavi reign. The repressive measures taken against women since the establishment of the Islamic Republic has gone further to decree its own interpretation of the Islamic law as the core of its judicial system and has passed the Constitution and the Law of Retribution in which the position of women has deteriorated to being even worse than the previous century in some aspects.

The evolution and the repression of the women's movements and women's rights in Iran resembles similar developments in other countries in the Middle East as well as in the West. For example, the demands raised by the feminists in Iran in the 1920s were identical to those issues raised by the feminists in the United States of America in the

early 1800s. Also, the regression of the position of women in Algeria since the Algerian Revolution to some extent is comparable to the encouragement of the domestic role of women in Iran since the Islamic Republic. Thus an assessment of the cross-cultural and cross-national patterns whether similar or dissimilar in women's rights movements would be useful in showing the universality, at least in some particulars, of the women's question and how women's movements in various countries can influence each other.

One clear issue regarding women is the use of women as a political force. During different historical eras and in almost any national context, women have been used, whether directly or indirectly to help as a political resource during wars, civil wars, national liberation movements and revolutions. Sometimes women have been conscious of their rights while actively supporting the upheavals such as the groups of women supporting the Revolution in Russia. Most often though, the involvement and activities of women in such movements have not necessarily been accompanied by a conscious support for the rights of women; such support has been thought to be diversionary to the aims of the movement. Again the position of women in the national liberation movements in Algeria could be used as an example.

In the case of Iran also, one could see that during different historical periods the support of women for various political causes has been used by the authorities, namely by men. The Islamic leaders have been able to communicate with the illiterate and more traditional classes of the female population in Iran and thus easily mobilize them for various political purposes. This has not been apparent only during the anti-Shah movements of the late 1970s but also during the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the century. The women of these strata today provide the bulk of female supporters and in general constitute a

very strong base of support for the Islamic Republic.

Other groups in Iran have also tried to get the support of women. In the 1920s Reza Shah introduced policies to gain the support of early Iranian feminists of the time to support his rule. Ironically however, a decade later, coercive methods and political repressions typical of his reign meant the end of any independent organisation including those of women. A state run women's group was then founded on his order.

Mohammed Reza Shah also, upon his return in 1952, sought the support of women for his rule. His aim was to recruit educated middle class women. His regime offered high rewards to those who supported him and to women of the educated and middle class. He ordered the foundation of the Women's Organisation of Iran, headed by his twin sister Ashraf, to deal with issues concerning women and to promote education for women. The main purpose of this organisation however, was to bring all women and their scattered activities under one central organisation, to be controlled directly by the government. No independent organisation was allowed.

Other political groups from the far right to the far left have also consistently worked towards recruitment and support from women. These groups include the Tudeh, the Fadayan and the Mojahedin. Thus all important political groups have recognised the importance of female support and mobilisation for their cause. Women themselves, however, have not yet been able to organise a united and independent group that would include women of all these political groups towards a common women's cause.

Many women of modern Iran have welcomed any opportunity that would get them out of their restrictive life style and involve them in non-domestic and political activities but the male dominated leadership of most political activities together with a lack of commitment and

feminist consciousness among these active women has meant that the women's rights issues have not been considered as a priority and not as important as the main cause of the movement. Many of these educated women members of various political groups have argued that women's issues should not be discussed separately from other political issues. Their argument has been that social, economic, and political conditions affect both men and women together and therefore they consider it diversionary and unrealistic to focus on the issue of women's rights alone. What they did not realise at the time was that to ignore this issue would be very harmful as well. What has happened therefore has been the inclusion and use of women in all political and national movements without the endorsement of the women's rights, whereas women's rights should be taken seriously and be among the priorities in the groups' political actions.

Again the situation with women's rights and the women's question in Iran is a demonstration of a very important point relevant to other Third World developing countries; the difficulty of understanding the concept of women's liberation in a national context. A number of Iranian intellectuals had backed the women's rights issues in the 1920s; however their position has never been clear with regard to this issue. The contemporary intellectuals also suffer the same indecision on what their real position is on the issue. No serious attempts were ever made to reform Islamic precepts in accordance with the needs of the modernisation process. The Pahlavi reforms had both positive and negative effects on the position of women. Its most positive efforts were on the expansion of education for women. The legal changes of the late 1960s and 1970s were impressive but not ideal. Given more time and opportunity, however, perhaps more positive legal reforms would have been forthcoming and would have reached all strata of women.

A direct comparison between the two regimes of the Pahlavi reign and

the Islamic Republic record on their position on women makes the Pahlavi regime appear very pro-feminist. The deterioration of the legal position of women under the Islamic Republic has resulted in the total endorsement of the Pahlavi reforms related to the women's position not only by monarchists but also by women of other groups. This support is based on analysis of the obvious and leaves out facts about the essence of the two regimes which, in appearance, seem to be so opposite. The Iranian experience could be a lesson for other developing nations.

The negative aspect of the Pahlavi reforms on women were indirect and less obvious. There were legal changes from above but traditional practices were not addressed but ignored. As was typical of the Pahlavi reign, grass roots involvements were not allowed and there was no research or national campaign to involve the more traditional and illiterate segments of the population. As most of these reforms were aimed at the urban middle classes, the misconceptions, fears, and problems of the traditional and illiterate women were not addressed systematically. In a hasty rush to modernise and Westernise the nation, the majority of its female population was ignored. Large sums of money were spent by the court entourage and financial government resources were not used to build schools, houses, or hospitals in urban slums, yet too much was spent on various irrelevant projects designed to impress foreign dignitaries. The vast sum of money spent on the celebration of the 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy is an example of this. The government of Iran in the 1970s had the economic and technological resources which would enable it to launch a major re-socialisation process through the media and the school system, aimed at the majority of women. Such a process could have been a very positive way of using the authoritarian system which controlled the media. Instead the media was used for publicising consumer goods and household items and make-up to women while at the same



time textbooks at schools reinforced traditional images of women and stereotypes of the role of women in the society. Thus the cultural practices stayed unchanged, the gap between the traditionalist and the Westernised enlarged and neither group had a proper conception of the rights and the position of women.

The religious leaders, on the other hand, strengthened and politicised their communication with the traditional women. They did not ignore women of this station but their anti-Western campaign grew around the concept of the female image, her morality, her sexuality, and her appearance. The clergy had no difficulty in aligning their own views with the cultural norms of these women and thus proved to be a major advantage they enjoyed. The Islamic Republic today is still using to its advantage the support and loyalty of these women.

The lack of harmony between traditionalism and pseudo-Western modernisation was a problem not specific to Iran but that of many other developing countries. Modernisation, together with Western capitalism, takes away a lot from traditional women, both in terms of economic and psychological factors. Many Third World countries do not grasp the issue of women's rights and have a distorted view of it. Thus the political elite, basically male, are not willing to tackle the issue of female oppression, yet they are defensive about traditional practices and imitate Western ways. For example, while there are complaints about the rapid growth of childbirth rates, culturally having male children is encouraged. The authorities rarely grasp the fact that the female half of the population, if trained and allowed to do so, is capable of participating in national affairs as much as the male population.

The concept of a women's movement needs also to be clarified. For example, the activities of the Woman's organisation of Iran, Sazeman-e Zanan-e Iran, is referred to as a women's movement. Whereas one could

argue that an effort by the government to enforce certain positive changes for women on behalf of women cannot be called a woman's movement. Movements of this kind do not start by government policies but are usually started by a discontented group with the aim of changing the existing order. Genuine independent movements involve continuous activities and evolve over time, tending to face opposition, usually by a government or other groups whose objectives are in opposition to these movements. They have to have a set of goals and ideas which they pursue faithfully.

The women's rights movement in Iran failed to develop fully. However, women's liberation movements have formed in various historical periods in Iran and this in itself shows that although the movement, like many other political movements in the Middle East and other developing countries, did not get the chance to develop much further than their initial stages of development, their identification as genuine independent movements and studying them could help women to understand their own history and their present position and therefore to understand that they have the right to demand changes meaningful for their position, from their governments. The occurrence of women's rights movements in the past and in the present both in Iran and in other countries could inspire women into consciousness and action.

Iranian women have achieved very little since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Islamic Republic in Iran has taken away what little was achieved by women and what was given to them through the Pahlavi government's efforts and organisation. In a survey done in 1981, Elizabeth Sanasarian asked Iranian female students of different political groups to rank issues of importance in Iranian women's rights at the time.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, the top three issues have been education, family laws, and the health of mothers and children. These issues were

advocated by early Iranian feminists of the 1920s. This further illustrates that Iranian women (feminists) are still fighting for exactly the same issues, showing that not much has been achieved in spite of the time which has elapsed and various historical events. The position of women has in fact deteriorated.

The position of women in Iran is not unique however. The United Nations International Decade for Women Conference in Copenhagen in 1980 has revealed a fact about the position of women since 1975; i.e. a deterioration in their position. Women in countries as advanced as the United States are facing considerable opposition from conservative groups such as the Moral Majority who oppose the Equal Rights Amendment and its views concerning women are very similar to those of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The status of women and the question of women therefore is a universal issue beyond class antagonism and economic structure. The overall status of women worldwide is a very bleak picture today. An international and unitary ideology is needed, an ideology which cuts across national and cultural barriers and goes beyond political and economic systems. It is very important for Iranian women and the women of the Third World to realise and accept that the concept of women's liberation is not just a Western bourgeois concept but is relevant worldwide because of the universal oppression of women.

The misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the concept of feminism and feminist issues between the Western and Third World countries has not helped to close this gap. Developing countries have been led to believe that women's liberation movements mean for their women "to be like men" or "to be like the West". Western women on the other hand, have been given the false image of Third World women being content with their oppression. The concepts of culture and tradition have very

often been used to counter any criticism about the inferior position of women in developing countries. Cross-cultural and comparative studies, however, will show that there exists more similarity than difference as far as women's movements are concerned. Thus women's rights is a political issue and must be considered as such. The interaction and cooperation between women is more needed today than at any other time, and it is the only method to enable women to destroy male-imposed misconceptions and to improve the position of women in the Third World.

While it is important to raise the consciousness of women in Third World countries such as Iran, it is equally important to "sensitise" the feminist women in the West to specific problems faced by women of the third World. Western ideology and Western feminism in particular, consider Islamic tradition as very oppressive, particularly towards women. This is because of the existence of strong patriarchal relations within it. Treatment of women by Islam is summarised by radical feminists in the imposition of veiling, the seclusion of women, the regulations and denial of her right to sexuality, and her humiliation through polygamy and repudiation. Great numbers of Westerns feminists, for example, concentrate on certain issues such as the veil or clitorrectomy as the major means of female oppression in Muslim countries and ignore the more important issues of illiteracy, poverty, health and family laws. Muslim feminists on the other hand see these issues as irrelevant and stick to political and economic issues.

Arab feminists, for example Magida Salman, view the humiliating position of Arab women as not related to the teachings of the Koran but to the fact that Arab ruling classes feel the necessity of having respect for Islamic tradition in their way of administrating their Islamic states.<sup>2</sup> She then argues that this necessity is caused by the Arab world having been dominated by colonialist and imperialist powers.

Other feminists such as Nawal El Sadawi also defend "true Islam" and argue that Islam has lost the democratic claims that it had promised to women and instead of that, Islam has become a chauvinistic religion in the hands of the Arab ruling class who have kept their ties with the imperialist powers.<sup>3</sup> She argues that therefore the position of Muslim women, like that of Western women, always depends on the dominant economic relations of the society. Muslim feminists like Sadawi, therefore, regard the issue of veiling and sexual politics as irrelevant to women in underdeveloped countries and issues that should not be dealt with in isolation.

Islam, for these feminists, seems to be taken as an ideology which is separate from the socio-economic relations of the society and situated outside social relations and practices, therefore it can be used as a tool by ruling classes. The seclusion of women is always explained as having an economic origin and therefore the influence of Islam as an ideology which happens to have rules for economic, social and political relations as well as for private and personal relationships within the society, is overlooked.

Fatima Mernissi views Islam as a set of social relations and puts the women's position within this. She emphasises and demonstrates that the question of sexuality for example is very central to the position of women,<sup>4</sup> whereas Sadawi and others see it as irrelevant to the woman's position. Mernissi shows that women's sexuality is acknowledged by Islam and a network of personal and social relations is built around, regulating it.

It was only after the cross-cultural examination of the position of women through political solidarity with the Third World and Muslim women that radical feminism became more sympathetic in looking at Islam and understanding its treatment of women. The blame in such studies is not

put on Islam but on the nation of Islamic states and women's position is attributed to the economic and social relations that dominate the policies for these Muslim countries.

In Iranian Shi'ite ideology and its interpretation, the concept of female sexuality is seen as very active and although it has been re-interpreted and re-evaluated by Iranian Shi'ite ideologues in modern times, it is still seen as an active power which needs to be controlled. This control manifests itself in the Islamic Republic's emphasis on the family institution and the hejab, and also in the new Iranian legislation, the Constitution, and the Law of Retribution. Iranian women have been unable to prevent the increasing pressure and injustice brought upon them by the new government.

With total censorship in force in Iran and the situation of war, one gets the impression that women have succumbed to their fate under this regime and have accepted the role designated for them by its leaders. However, it is difficult to assess this. Women's silence might be seen as a sign of temporary confusion rather than a surrender of all they have accomplished since the beginning of this century. At least, one can argue with certainty that educated women of different classes and political backgrounds have become more conscious about their own identity as women and their own special needs and interests.

At the present time under severe oppression and war both men and women have to surrender to the atrocities of the government. Once the war with Iraq ends, the whole atmosphere will change once again and only time will show the extent to which the Iranian woman who has taken to the streets, clad in chador with raised fist or gun in hand to support a popular revolution, would accept the concept of an Islamic government and its notions of womanhood enforced on her by its leaders.

The events of the last decade and in particular the experiences of

women under the Islamic Republic of Iran have resulted in the re-evaluation of the position of women and thus a rise in feminist consciousness in Iran, not just among women but for men as well. The discriminations and pressures from the new regime and the loss of its few gains under the previous regime has made the question of women in Iran a major issue of national importance and debate and each and every organisation has been obliged to articulate its views on this issue.

The first two years following the revolution saw the formation of various women's groups. Thus the nucleus of a national political women's movement was established. Various factors however have prevented it from expanding and using its full capacity. The main external factor being the severe repression of the government, not only regarding women's groups but also with all other political progressive groups in opposition. The internally damaging factor for the independent women's groups in Iran has been the disagreements within Marxist ideology which has also afflicted the leftist movement in Iran in general. The major disagreement here is that most women believers in Marxist-Leninist ideology view the question of women's liberation only within the wider context of the proletarian and working class revolution. In other words, they believe that women will be liberated through a proletarian revolution and thus independent women's groups are not needed as the main question is the class struggle. The propaganda and publications of most of these groups have therefore been directed to the working class women or the "toiling" women. They see the struggle and emancipation of women only within the class struggle with an economic base.

The great majority of the women activists of these groups are young, educated, middle or lower middle class women who have little experience as "toiling" women. They therefore observed the situation as an outsider. They see the major problem of the peasant and working class

women to be their economic problems. They completely overlook other fundamental problems that unite all women regardless of their class background. These problems consist of the patriarchal social relations that create the discriminations which women face both at home and in public. The degree of this repression faced by women in their family relations, in sexual and social relations, varies in accordance with class background but for the majority of women they are substantial. For all women, whether professional, political activist, worker in a factory or peasant farmer, the very fact of being female creates disadvantages. Only the raising of this issue and a search for its causes and its roots would gain sympathy and support from all women as it would be the issue that touches every aspect of their lives.

To view all social problems, including women's problems, as a product of capitalism is to ignore the greater exploitation of women under the feudalist and theocratic regimes. The leftist women's group ignores and isolates women of their own class, the bourgeois and the petty-bourgeois class, by focusing their attention on the working class women. They thus ignore the power of resentment and anger that the Islamic government has created amongst middle class women. Also with the rate of 90% illiteracy among peasant women and the women of the poor urban classes, ironically, the publications of these groups were unable to reach their targeted audience. Another factor is that masses of poor women with large families to support are so preoccupied with the problems of simply making a living that they have little spare time or energy to get involved in other activities. They have internalised their inferior position through traditional conditioning such that they cannot be expected to become active feminists fighting for women's causes and women's liberation.

The proletarian women, who are the most exploited, ultimately



possess the greatest potential for achieving women's emancipation. However, at this period in Iranian history, the problem is that of access to the proletarian woman. The traditional ideological barrier that surrounds them must first be broken. These barriers of patriarchal values and religious views and the acceptance of inferiority are all reinforced through the material conditions within which they live.

Without the economic and social changes that would bring financial independence and the material security, no significant feminist consciousness could effectively be raised among them. Thus the economic and social policies of any future government would be crucial in the advancement of feminist consciousness and the feminist movement. For the women of the progressive groups, it is particularly important to acknowledge the potential of the middle and lower middle class women. They should therefore put an emphasis on the needs and demands of these women.

Different organisations of women abroad, in spite of the massive problems that they are facing, at least enjoy the democracy prevailing in the Western countries. Although the number of these groups is very small and their audience exiled middle class women, they are experiencing a consciousness about the question of Iranian women which is unique in that this group of women have experienced at least the events of the White Revolution and the Islamic Revolution and indirectly, whether by reading or through their mothers' and grandmothers' accounts of their experiences of the previous era, have second hand knowledge of the position of women during that period.

Many of these women have also, during the last two decades, been affiliated to or sympathisers of opposition groups such as the Mojahedin and the Fadayan as well as the Confederation of Students Abroad and after their experiences have come to the conclusion that being part of the

women's group of this or that organisation does not help the women's cause. It is only through an independent women's organisation that the demands of women would be addressed and requested.

The experience and consciousness of this group of women is not only unique but extremely valuable. Apart from organising meetings, women of these groups have focused their activities more on researching about women. Being in the West, they have access to numerous libraries where they can read about the experience of feminist movements throughout the world, they interact with feminist women and learn from their experiences. These learnt experiences combined with their actual participation in the events of the Islamic Revolution and subsequent "deception" has made these women conscious of the position of women in Iran. They no longer blindly accept theories that have developed in the West but they apply them to their own case and have developed theories relevant to the Iranian case themselves.

Whether the activities and publications of these women abroad has any influence on the position or consciousness raising of women in Iran is questionable at this time. Severe censorship and repression does not allow much room for these to reach the masses of women who are more for the Islamic position of women than the feminist view. However, Iranian women of this class have now re-evaluated their position.

With the phase of repressions in 1981, small, independent groups of women were forced to cease their activities inside Iran. Great numbers of these women left Iran and once again the focus of opposition to the Iranian government by all opposition groups, including the women's groups, shifted to Europe and the United States. With the changed attitudes of these women, independent Iranian women's groups flourished again, this time outside Iran. The influence of these groups among the masses of women is very small, almost nonexistent. Also the majority of

their members are from the middle classes so their publications reach very small numbers of women. However, many of the women activists now realise the need for independent women's organisations that are able to publicise the struggle for women's rights on a broad spectrum.

The new consciousness and the disillusionment of these women also resulted in their closely examining the attitudes of their male comrades in the leftist organisations, who had always considered the women's rights issue as secondary and dependent on the socialist revolution. These male partners, however, have been influenced by these women, and a great number of them now realise that an independent women's movement is the only way to achieve equality for women.

The women's question has become a prominent political issue in Iran since the revolution. The issue has been taken up by all political groups in opposition to the present regime. The concern shown by these groups provides an opportunity for feminists to articulate their concerns for women's rights in any future government.

Notes to Chapter 8

1. Elizabeth Sanasarian, 1982, p.155.
2. Magida Salman, Khamsin, p.26.
3. Nawal El-Sa'dawi, Hidden Face of Eve, p.XIV.
4. Merrissi, Beyond the Veil.

APPENDIX

IRANIAN WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY MOVEMENTS IN EUROPE  
AND THE UNITED STATES

As the formulation and activities of the newly formed independent women's organisations were banned and the attacks on women's, as well as on any other non-supportive groups, increased, many women left Iran to exile themselves in other countries, mostly Europe and the United States. Great numbers of these women had participated in the processions and demonstrations both before and after the revolution. They had directly or indirectly been involved with women's organisations or political leftist organisations. These women, using their experience and awareness of the women's question, started to organise Iranian women abroad and form independent women's groups in different countries. Here I will mention three groups formed in England, Germany, and the United States, which could be representative of the Iranian women's activities, hopes, and achievements outside Iran.

The Iranian Women's Liberation Group was founded by a few Iranian women in London in 1979. These women, feeling the necessity of organising women, held a conference on 12 May 1979, to discuss issues concerning Iranian women at the time. The group was then founded following the conference and held regular informal meetings with an increasing membership. The conference organisers had been influenced by the recent revolution and the emerging women's movement in Iran and thought it was also necessary for Iranian women abroad to get together and form groups with activities towards consciousness raising and their position within Iran, and to form solidarity with women's groups in Iran, thus participating in their struggles within Iran. Their goal also was to work towards a better understanding of the Iranian women's situation by

the public and by the feminist groups in England and to interact and exchange opinions with them. This group later changed its name to the Iranian women Solidarity Group.

Apart from regular weekly meetings, its main initial activity was to publish newsletters for women in Persian and booklets in English. It had established regular contact with women's organisations in Iran, exchanging information and publications. It also organised photographic and slide exhibitions and had shown a film of the demonstration by women during the International Woman's Day of 1979 and their protests against compulsory veiling and the abolition of legal reforms in their favour.

The Independent Group of Iranian Women in Germany was founded in 1980 when a group of women organised a committee to protest against the announcement by the Iranian Embassy that women has to have passport photographs taken with their hair covered or their passports would not be renewed.

Prior to the formation of this organisation, there were scattered Iranian women's groups in Germany. The Iranian Women's Group in Hanover had already been formed in 1979 and was active with a group of German feminists publishing pamphlets on the position of women in Iran both in German and in Persian. In West Berlin also anothe Iranian women's liberation group was active in publishing material in both German and Persian. Among their publications the newspaper "Woman and Liberation", Zan va Azadi, can be mentioned. Another similar group was also active in Frankfurt. It was this latter group that invited different groups to organise the committee to protest.

Therefore in Germany the basis for women's activities existed in a scattered way and in the form of small groups of women. This gathering, though, formed the beginning of a larger group and activities at the level of an organisation, a movement as they call it. Different groups

of women had realised that they could no longer wait to be helped or to receive support from "progressive" groups. So they began their cooperation and solidarity. Their first organisational meeting took place in Frankfurt and the "movement" was established.

Similar events occurred in the United States. Women of different backgrounds in various cities had started to form small groups and to hold regular meetings. Various political groups, particularly the Confederation of Iranian Students in the US, each had their own women's group with activities alongside their main political affiliation. By 1982, most women affiliated with these groups had felt the necessity of independent women's organisations and had become very disappointed and disillusioned with these political groups whose activities regarding women were limited almost to celebrations of International Women's Day.

In November of 1982, the Iranian Women's Group of Philadelphia invited various women's groups throughout the United States to gather for the purpose of discussing the possibility of the formation at national level of an Iranian Woman's Organisation. Representatives of different Iranian Women's groups from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, Washington, New York, New Jersey, Boston, and Philadelphia participated in this gathering. This meeting formed the basis of a network of Iranian women's groups with the initial name of "Committee for Organisation of an Independent Movement for Women".

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