

DĀNESH

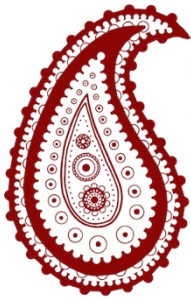
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Volume 4 (2019)



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The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA





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From the Faculty Advisors

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This fourth volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As with their work on volume three, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi

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Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

From the Editors-in-Chief

We are proud to present to you the fourth volume of the University of Oklahoma's Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies, *DĀNESH*. Through the past three editions of the journal we have seen wonderful presentations on varying regional topics, spanning the breadths of history and social strata. In the tradition of the meaning of *DĀNESH*, or knowledge, we present these articles as an offering to expand the collective dialogue on the understanding of the Iranian and Persian state. We are pleased to have worked on this edition with a group of driven authors to present an edition comprising of submissions focusing on both historical issues and events as well as contemporary issues that Iranians are currently facing.

This work is a collective effort among our undergraduate authors and editors. We would like to extend a humble thanks to our Associate Editors, without whom we would not be able to produce such a successful and professional journal. It would also be remiss of us to not extend a heartfelt thank you to the Farzaneh Family, for without their continued support of the Iranian Studies program none of this would be possible. The University of Oklahoma's Libraries and Printing Services are the unsung heroes of this endeavor, as without their support we would not have the ability to make *DĀNESH* so accessible, both our print and digital versions. Thank you to the tireless, diligent work of our authors, who have crafted these amazing works that we are proudly sharing with you.

And finally, we are wholly indebted to the continued and unwavering support of Dr. Afshin Marashi, whose guidance and advice was invaluable in this journal's creation and continuance. This work, and so much of the growth of the Iranian Studies program as a whole, would not be possible without your faith in us, and our institution. Your academic guidance, advice, and friendship have been invaluable to us.

Corey Standley (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

Kayleigh Kuyon (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

***Fatwas and Feminism:* How Iran's Religious Leadership Obstructs Feminist Reforms**

Anu S. Asokan*

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In 2009, a pro-government *Basiji* militia member shot Neda Agha Soltan in the chest. Neda was a philosophy student who participated in protests against a possibly corrupt election, and her death was the spark that started the Green Movement and increasing protests.¹ As the video of her murder became viral, the foreign media was expelled from Iran. Over 150 well-known reformists and journalists, as well as thousands of demonstrators, were arrested.² Throughout the protests, the repercussions, and the government's eventual crushing of the Green Movement, women were at the forefront of activism.

Iranian women have a long history of protest: they were critical to the 1979 Revolution and subsequent regime change. Iranian feminists joined together with other factions, like leftists, working class, and clerics, to overthrow the Pahlavi monarchy. These very different groups followed the leadership of the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini, who called for wealth redistribution, among other things.³ For a population that had endured a "repressive dictatorship, exploitative influence of the West, extremely uneven distribution of the wealth...and bureaucratic corruption in their workplaces," the opportunity for a new government was appealing.⁴ Iranian feminists had

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¹ "'Neda' becomes rallying cry for Iranian protests," *CNN*, June 22, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/21/iran.woman.twitter>.

² Sanam Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 201.

³ Arzoo Osanloo, *Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 152.

⁴ Paria Gashtili, "Gender Politics in the Contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran," *Philosophical Topics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 123.

a stake in the elimination of these unfair aspects of the Pahlavi government, but they also wanted to take action against the “shallowness of women’s emancipation” and human rights abuses that the monarchy had promoted.⁵

Although the pre-revolution Iranian feminists shared similar goals with other factions, especially the clerics, “the absence of a democratic, secular, and progressive leadership, as well as...the misleading promises of Khomeini” led them put their faith in the wrong person.⁶ Even though these different factions worked together against the monarchy, “due to the lack of cohesion and organization, [the liberals] were marginalized by the clerical caste that brought about the second revolution, the Islamic one, and secured a theocracy in Iran.”⁷ Khomeini recognized how essential female activists were in the 1979 Revolution, but nevertheless set the stage for the rapid institutionalization of gender inequality.

Under the Pahlavi dynasty, polygamy was outlawed, abortion allowed, and the minimum marriage age of women raised.⁸ After the 1979 Revolution, public spaces (such as beaches and schools) were gender segregated, female judges lost their positions, and polygamy was legalized. Women in particular were affected by this shift in rights; in most cases, they lost both custody of their children and their ability to divorce.⁹ The Iranian government’s current position on gender is “that men and women are fundamentally ‘different’ beings in nature...[which] has translated into a reality for women in which they occupy a subordinate status to men.”¹⁰ The state explicitly states that the life of a woman is worth only half of that of a man: the *quessas* law “stipulates that the amount of ‘blood-money’ payable to the family of a murdered woman should be half the amount that is payable to the family of a murdered man.”¹¹ The government continues valuing men over women even in recent years: “In 2007/08 the state imposed a quota system, offering 60 percent of university places to male students and 40 percent to female students, even if female

⁵ Ibid.; Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 172.

⁶ Gashtili, “Gender Politics”, 123.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rebecca Barlow and Akbarzadeh Shahram, “Prospects for Feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2008): 23.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

students' grades are higher than male students' grades," once again institutionalizing the belief that women belong in the home.¹²

The data support the claim that post-revolutionary Iranian women suffer greatly due to this discrimination. For example, in 2003 "the ratio of estimated female to estimated male earned income was a mere 0.38."¹³ Although some conservative Iranians may argue that this income inequality is irrelevant because Iranian men provide for the family anyway, that is not always the case. The Association of Iranian Women in the UK, a non-governmental organization, found that "unemployment and poverty (clearly two interrelated issues) are the leading causes of why disturbing numbers of Iranian women turn to prostitution as a means of subsistence."¹⁴ Iranian women clearly have lost much in the past four decades, despite their bravery and contribution to the revolution.

The future of feminism in Iran is highly dependent on its history and current conditions. Patriarchal beliefs have been widespread in Iran for millennia, but it is the modern-day, Islamic government structure that codifies these inequalities and makes it all but impossible for even elected officials to implement feminist or other reformist policies. Analyzing the history of Iranian feminism reveals that working within the current constitutional framework is fruitless and produces no real reforms. Despite the obstacles Iranian feminists face, with the appropriate conditions and ideologies, gender equality can prevail.

Motivations for Female Oppression

The reasons for these recent changes are numerous, but many can be traced to a backlash to Westernization. Iranians have numerous examples of how detrimental certain events related to Westernization were to their sovereignty and quality of life. Many of these events occurred during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who were staunch and often extreme supporters of modernization. For example, the industrialization that was praised by capitalistic societies brought tangible problems. Scholar Erika Friedl demonstrated that "in [twentieth century] Iran, partial industrialization dislodged workers from agriculture faster than they could be absorbed into industry. Based on the traditional model of development, men

¹² Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*, edited by Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

were the primary target of absorption into industry. Therefore, in spite of new job opportunities..., the overall daily life and economic position of the majority of women declined.”¹⁵ Therefore, in the eyes of many Iranians, Westernization could be linked with hypocrisy, interference, and false promises. Twentieth century “Iranian men and women... perceived modernization as simply imperialism in disguise,” because of their long history of unequal relationships between Iran and European or American powers. Unfortunately, this rejection of Western standards manifested itself uniquely in the constitutional and legal treatment of women.

The post-revolutionary state has focused on women for reasons that are particular to Iranian history and culture. The privilege and burden of being cultural repositories has often fallen upon women, and therefore women have a higher standard upholding the traditions of an entire culture. This is reflected in one scholar’s assessment that “a woman’s failure to conform to the traditional norms could be labelled as renunciation of indigenous values and loss of cultural identity.”¹⁶ Westernization also brought a social and economic division among Iranian women, primarily because of the increasing:

polarity between modern and traditional lifestyles. Among the urban middle class, two layers of women emerged....: *chadori* (veiled) women, representing the female fold of bazaar-oriented (merchants, traders, artisans, shopkeepers) ...and *beechador* (unveiled) women, representing modernized, educated females of the newly emerging *edaari*, that is, office oriented (professionals, technicians, government employees).¹⁷

Among the Iranian public, these divisions were strongly associated with Westernization. Traditional, veiled women were seen as old-fashioned and knowledgeable, whereas modern, unveiled women were “soon considered to be ‘Westoxicated’ (meaning to be under the influence of the toxic culture of the West), objectified, and identity-less (*beehoviyyat*).”¹⁸ Iranian women who worked in the office, dressed in Western styles, and did not wear a veil were

¹⁵ Nayereh Tohidi, “Modernity, Islamization, and Women in Iran,” in *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. Valentine Moghadam (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

considered to be “complying with the forces of ‘Western imperialists.’”¹⁹ With these type of explicit associations between the evils of Westernization and Iranian women’s clothing and professions, it is not surprising that the revolutionary government tightened restrictions on women.

These revolutionary forces “mobilized the image of women as the symbolic bearers of virtue who represented the nation’s honor and hence needed to be saved from Western corruption.”²⁰ The new government’s dislike of the Pahlavi monarchy and modernization were focused on its effects on women, and therefore the reversal of some of the women’s freedoms were motivated by a desire to return to tradition and to eradicate Westernization. More recently, the state has been engaged in a “lengthy campaign against...Western cultural influences on gender relations. In schools, in the media, in political arenas, the government has identified women’s subservience as a linchpin of Iranian and Islamic identity.”²¹ By framing its current regulations in the context of the negative effects of Westernization, the state is able to justify gender inequality and its limitation on women’s rights.

What is important to recognize is that most of these restrictions are based on interests in maintaining *Iranian* culture, virtue, national identity, and tradition; the backlash against Westernization is rooted in the remembrance of Iranian history. These restrictions are not solely, or even primarily, because of Islamic values, they are because of preexisting social and patriarchal values shared by many cultures worldwide. Islam has been used to justify inequality, but so have other methods. For example, the science that men and women have biological differences has been twisted to justify female oppression. In 1979, Ayatollah Morteza Mutahhari claimed that “the biological differences between men and women...[indicate that] woman’s most important duty is motherhood, so her ‘natural’ activities occupy her with family.”²² Ultimately, “the roots of patriarchal oppression go far deeper than the Islamisation of state and society since the 1979 revolution.”²³ In order to establish equality, it is

¹⁹ Ibid., 127.

²⁰ Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 129.

²¹ Charles Kurzman, “A Feminist Generation in Iran,” *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2008): 298.

²² Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 34-35.

²³ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, “Introduction,” in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 26.

vital to recognize that the 1979 Revolution is not solely responsible for promoting patriarchal oppression.

Unequal gender regulations have multiple origins and a very long history, mostly relating to Iranian society and its past, but the justifications for female oppression have changed to suit the needs of the oppressors. The most damning evidence for this contention comes from an analysis of government policies on the veil. In 1936, Reza Shah ordered the compulsory unveiling of Iranian women, in the guise of women's liberation. His actions did not free all women as intended; specifically, "girls who refused to unveil or whose guardians refused to allow them to do so were withdrawn from schools.... Working-class women for whom unveiling was the equivalent of public nudity were compelled to leave their jobs and spend the rest of their lives confined to domestic spaces."²⁴ Religious or conservative women were forced to choose between their lifelong practices and their engagement in the public sphere, and many chose the former. Even this choice stigmatized them "as traditional, backward and uncivilized."²⁵ Years later, yet another restriction on women's clothing was issued by the government—this time Khomeini's post-revolutionary government required that all women cover themselves in public with a veil. Surprisingly, the reasoning behind this law was not that different from the Pahlavi justification: it would free the women. Current Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei has stated that the modesty from veiling protects women "from abuse by men."²⁶ Supporters of mandatory veiling claim that women can participate in the public sphere more.

The striking similarity between the 1936 unveiling of women and the post-revolutionary veiling of women is that both decisions were made by men about women's bodies. This is strong and clear evidence that the patriarchy, rather than Islam itself, has a significant part in the oppression of women; women were *not* included in either of these decisions, even though these laws only apply to women. The veil itself is merely "an empty signifier, and has

²⁴ Rebecca Gould, "Hijab as Commodity Form: Veiling, Unveiling, and Misveiling in Contemporary Iran," *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 3 (2014): 234.

²⁵ Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Bypassing Islamism and Feminism: Women's Resistance and Rebellion in Post-revolutionary Iran," *Revue Des Mondes Musulmans Et De La Méditerranée* 128 (2012): 210.

²⁶ Khamenei (@khamenei_ir), "A woman can have active presence & deep influence on social arenas—as Iranian women are so influential. The features of today's Iranian woman include modesty, chastity, eminence, protecting herself from abuse by men, refraining from humiliating herself into appeasing men," Twitter post, March 8, 2018, 2:50 a.m., https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir.

been deployed equally for the ends of women's liberation as for their oppression. The crucial question is not whether or not a woman chooses to veil, but whether the choice to veil is forced on her by the state."²⁷ What must be emphasized is that patriarchal governments believe they can interfere with a woman's individual choice by claiming that their way is best for her. This is true of both the secular Pahlavi and theocratic Khomeini governments, and it is not unique to Islam. Thus, "Western discourses which state that women's liberation will come with liberation from Islam...[is] simplistic and damaging," because Islam is not the first, main, or only origin of or justification for gender inequality.²⁸

Implications of a Theocracy

However, Islam does play a major role in the legalization of these unfair social constructs. Specifically, Islam is written into the very structure of the Iranian government, in the form of the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council is not a mere advisory committee to the President; it is "the highest power in the country and the office of the president is the second highest."²⁹ This office of religious leadership was written into the Iranian Constitution. The Guardian Council comprises of twelve members, all of whom are directly or indirectly nominated by the Supreme Leader, whose role is also written into the Constitution. Both the Council of Guardians and the Supreme Leader have final say in almost all political decisions, and the Supreme Leader is granted the ability to appoint the heads of multiple departments, including the military. For an Iranian law to be passed, it must be approved by both the majority of the Parliament and the Guardian Council.³⁰

The implications of this government structure are highly relevant to women's rights. Even though women can exercise their constitutional right to vote and to run for government positions, these rights are greatly restricted by the Council. Since 1979, "a number of women have signed up as presidential candidates; however, all female candidates have been rejected by the Council of Guardians."³¹ This hindering of public participation is reflected in both the biggest elected office of the country as well as small

²⁷ Gould, "Hijab as Commodity," 235.

²⁸ Rostami-Povey, "Introduction," 2.

²⁹ Jamileh Kadivar, "Women and Executive Power," in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 122.

³⁰ Gashtili, "Gender Politics," 132.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

community branches. Despite feminist efforts to increase women's participation in local councils, their involvement has increased only a mere 1.5% between 1994 and 2004.³² These examples show that what is written into law—namely, that women have the right to become political candidates—is often starkly different from practice, and the legal, constitutional power of the Guardian Council is responsible for this difference. It is difficult to predict whether the Iranian people would vote for a female President, simply because no woman has ever gotten to that stage. Perhaps the Guardian Council would allow more female candidates if their own members happened to be feminists, but the fact that women's rights are left dependent on the beliefs of twelve members is what is troubling. Even if the majority of Iranian society does support patriarchal views, the portion of the population that wishes for female empowerment would have more opportunities to enact their beliefs through their constitutional rights if candidates were not vetted by the Council.

In addition to this legalized limitation on women's rights, there is much indirect power wielded by the religious institutions. In 2001, the liberal President Khatami and the Parliament wanted women on Khatami's cabinet, but this plan was rejected by the religious elite. Khatami "was confronted with a great deal of opposition by a number of grand ayatollahs."³³ Because his position and the policies he wanted to promote would rely so heavily on his relationship with the religious elite, he was not willing to "take a risk which would have made the conservative clerics angry and could have prompted them to issue fatwas...[or instruct] the citizens not to pay taxes."³⁴ The clerics have such great influence that they are as powerful as the elected President or elected members of Parliament who are there to represent the people. Therefore, even with liberal candidates and majority votes from the Parliament, the disproportionate influence of the religious elite on the government was able to maintain the status quo. The rights of half the population are left in jeopardy because the structure of the government grants an unelected office such great power. The sheer power awarded to the unelected religious leadership has effects on every aspect of Iranian politics, not just women's rights. Reform, both feminist and otherwise, should rely on public opinion, but here it relies on both the vote and the beliefs of the

³² Elaheh Koolae, "Women in the Parliament," in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 140.

³³ Kadivar, "Executive Power," 126.

³⁴ Ibid.

Guardian Council. Even though the Iranian Constitution awards the right to vote to both men and women, Iran cannot become a true democracy as long as the religious office has this type of superior control.

Opposition from Iranian Feminists

With the structure of government as such, what is needed for change? Under what conditions would women's rights improve? Some Iranian feminists argue that the laws are in place to help women, so therefore women must use the legal system to its full extent. The female judge and former politician Nahid Hajinouri believes that rights are re-established when women repeatedly try to get them enforced with legal methods.³⁵ For example, one law student was fined for wearing mascara and lipstick, but she told the judge that the penalties for modern makeup are not specifically listed in the Qur'an or in the civil code. Because she was informed, the judge greatly reduced her fine.³⁶ In addition, Iranian women who feel powerless in their marriages can also use the courts "to renegotiate the terms of marriage or persuade their husbands to comply with the terms of the marriage."³⁷ For example, one woman who went to court asked the judge to file a divorce for her, but instead the judge obtained a signed statement from her husband promising to get better living quarters for their family. Although the woman ended up staying with her husband, she did have more power ultimately because he was forced to comply with his court-appointed duties. Legal anthropologist and former lawyer Arzoo Osanloo claims that "women's increased petitions to the court, their increased use of the legal process and greater reliance on a discourse of rights pose challenges to statist patriarchy and compel the courts to implement women's state-sanctioned rights. Thus, women's discourses of rights in Tehran's family courts could be seen as part of the resistance."³⁸ These women resist the state—by complying.

However, these petitions do not actually increase women's rights; all of the legal hassle simply results in courts finally executing the rights these women were already supposed to have. The law student should not have been given a fine at all; the fact that she was, which was entirely determined by a subjective judge who had no legal basis for doing so, is incredibly troubling. Perhaps Iranian feminists are "still happy about the small achievements of these brave and defiant women, simply because [they] do not see them just as

³⁵ Osanloo, *Politics of Women's Rights*, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

women, but as women in a Muslim society, and that, unfortunately, makes [them] lower [their] expectations.”³⁹ Using the legal system to reclaim their rights is an improvement over the status quo, but it is not active, thorough resistance. The women who use this legal method are not calling for change to the laws or change to the government structure that enables this type of bias and subjectivity, and therefore the underlying problems themselves are not resolved. This method may bring benefits to their lives and they should be applauded for their persistence, but it is not enough to bring change by itself.

A second, more widespread branch of resistance is Islamic feminism. Islamic feminists from both Iran and other parts of the Middle East believe that Islam itself is not the fundamental problem—rather those in power (specifically, men) interpret Islam wrongly, often to satisfy their own patriarchal principals. They believe that “gender discrimination has a social origin. In other words, there is no ground for such discrimination in the holy book of Muslims or in the teachings of the prophet.”⁴⁰ This viewpoint is partly a backlash to Western thought, especially because many Western and secular feminists point to Islam as the underlying cause of women’s oppression in the Middle East. Iranian feminists are “aware and critical of dogmatic faith in Western secular liberalism which has a history of violence, wars, colonial exploitation....”⁴¹ Feminist pioneers in Iran, like Shahla Sherkat, the founder of women’s magazine *Zanan*, believe that “gender equality is Islamic;” therefore, Iran can continue its Islam-based government structure and still bring change to women’s lives.⁴²

Islamic feminists in Iran have several contentions in favor of their perspective. First, they point to the Qur’an and legendary Islamic women like Fatimeh and Zaynab, who were “non-domesticated, non-passive, socially engaged, and politically militant.”⁴³ In fact, Zaynab “fought alongside men in the battlefields...[and] ensured the continuity of Shi’ism,” which is even more significant considering Iran’s Shiite background.⁴⁴ They point to the importance of over a dozen women directly mentioned in the Qur’an as well as strong and brave religious women from more recent Iranian history to prove that Islam has a long tradition of female power, and this power has been

³⁹ Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 134.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ Rostami-Povey, “Introduction,” 7.

⁴² Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 125.

⁴³ Tohidi, “Modernity, Islamization,” 121.

⁴⁴ Rostami-Povey, “Historical Context,” 25.

minimized and usurped by misogynists.⁴⁵ In addition, the pride that Islamic feminists hold in these legendary Iranian-Muslim women emphasizes that secular and Western states do not have a monopoly on female empowerment. This “counterargument” to Western secularism validates the legitimacy of Iran’s theocracy.

Second, they point to the specific patriarchs who began deemphasizing these brave and strong historical women. Ayatollah Mutahhari “believed that Islam gave priority to societies, communities, and families over individuals....In 1979, Mutahhari’s writings served largely as the basis for gendered social divisions,” because he argued that women could best serve their communities by adhering to domestic life and motherhood.⁴⁶ By tracing the coercion of women into the domestic sphere back to Mutahhari’s fairly recent interpretations, “religious-oriented Iranian feminists...[can emphasize] that women’s problems are a result of misguided male interpretations of Islam’s holy texts, as opposed to the principles of Islam itself.”⁴⁷ Finally, Islamic feminists in Iran point out that “Talibanism and Saudi-style conservatism have never existed in Iran....The high number of votes cast in favour of reformist candidates in elections since the 1990s shows that the majority of the people believe in *Fiqh Poya* (dynamic jurisprudence) and the idea that Islam is compatible with democracy and modernism.”⁴⁸ Because Islamic conservatism is moderated by a democracy, and because there is such a high level of participation from the Iranian public, Islamic feminists contend that the Iranian people embrace their government’s unification of state and religion.

Islamic feminism is appealing because of the strength of its arguments and because it calls for internal change and reform rather than instability and revolution. This “religious-oriented feminism has proven to be a flourishing force since it does not challenge the Iranian regime, but confines itself to targeting aspects of state policy that are deemed to be deviating from Islam.”⁴⁹ However, as secular feminists have contended, this method of resistance and philosophy can be problematic and unsuccessful.

⁴⁵ Zahra Nejadbahram, “Women and Employment,” in *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* eds. Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 74.

⁴⁶ Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 35.

⁴⁷ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 25.

⁴⁸ Rostami-Povey, “Introduction,” 3.

⁴⁹ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 26.

Secular Feminism and Criticisms of Other Feminist Methods

Secular feminists call for a government where religion does not have a formal role to play. Furthermore, they specifically “view the merging of Islam and politics as a central part of the problem that Iranian women face,” which is where secular feminism strongly diverges from Islamic feminism.⁵⁰ Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi is a devoted Muslim, but she is still a secular feminist because she has come to accept that “when religion is given a formal role to play in the political arena, religious texts make powerful and sometimes easy tools with which to ostensibly justify gender inequality.”⁵¹ Secular feminists are not arguing that Islam altogether is incompatible with feminism or democracy. Rather, they wish that Islam, or any religion, would not have a legal part in the government.

Secular feminists contend that Islamic feminism is not effective, and they have numerous examples that support this contention. In the late 1990s, when the Iranian Parliament was more liberal than it had been previously, it voted to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Iranian feminists had been fighting for the ratification of this major international agreement for several years, and the fact that the Parliament had passed CEDAW was seen as a feminist victory.⁵² However, this success was short-lived. The Guardian Council vetoed CEDAW, claiming that women and men are inherently unequal and therefore CEDAW would be against Islamic principles.⁵³ In a less extreme example, a law “that raised the minimum legal age for girls to marry from nine to thirteen was only approved by the Guardian Council” with the stipulation that a clause would be added.⁵⁴ The Guardian Council requested a clause that would allow girls who were younger than thirteen to marry if they had permission of a guardian. This effectively took away the point of raising the minimum age at all, because guardians could continue marrying off underage girls. Thus, despite the representatives’ best efforts to minimize pre-teenage marriage, the Guardian Council’s power was so great that this law could be rendered useless. Islamic feminists maintain that women’s rights can be improved within the framework of the current

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵³ Kambiz Fattahi, “Women’s bill ‘unites’ Iran and US,” *BBC News*, July 31, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6922749.stm.

⁵⁴ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 28.

government; the CEDAW and marriage age law failures are just a few of many strong examples against this belief.

A reform-oriented parliament under President Khatami hoped that the *ulama* would:

...incrementally yield their orthodox reading of Islam to the more enlightened version of the faith proffered by Khatami and his backers...[However,] the conservative-dominated Guardian Council repeatedly exercised its veto power to block legislation that would cause any consequential change to the status quo. At root...was the Iranian-Islamic principle of *velayate faqih*: governance of the most learned Islamic scholar... It effectively relegates other branches of the government, including the parliament, to function as optional extras to a predetermined political agenda.⁵⁵

Therefore, the parliament's intention was almost irrelevant because it opposed the beliefs of the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council's overwhelming constitutional power successfully and repeatedly suffocated reformist ideas.

In fact, one female Parliamentarian expressed her extreme disillusionment with the government structure in a dramatic move: Fatemah Haqiqatjoo "resigned in protest against the Guardian Council's disqualification of candidates from the legislative elections."⁵⁶ Her resignation was fully justified: in the "2004 legislative elections, the Guardian Council disqualified one third of the 8,200 individuals who filed papers to run as candidates... [leaving] a list of conservative candidates with no strong ties to the reform movement."⁵⁷ There is no higher authority on the powerlessness of Islamic feminists in the Parliament than a former member herself resigning. For Haqiqatjoo to resign, with the public explanation "that reform from within the state system was no longer possible," is shocking.⁵⁸ Not only is Islamic feminism unsuccessful, it actually hurts secular feminist efforts. For one, depending on the *ulama* to reinterpret Islam to support gender equality will leave "women's rights contingent upon interpretations,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35.

and as a result, [make] women vulnerable.”⁵⁹ Rights that were carefully argued and won after years of activism could easily be reversed if new and more conservative scholars joined the Guardian Council. In addition, “the fact that any moves for reform and improvement of women’s conditions in Iran need to be formulated in the language of Islam... makes these moves hostage to a set of ideas and principles that are grounded in the experience of seventh century Arabia.”⁶⁰ For example, the Qur’an specifically states that only men and women exist, but modern Western feminism includes gender fluidity.⁶¹ If Islam does not acknowledge the possibility of gender fluidity, how would Muslim scholars be able to address this concept without simply using their own, perhaps outdated, views? Lastly, “scholars are also worried that Islamic feminists delegitimize the activities of secular feminists by providing a less threatening ‘feminist’ option that actually does not result in significant social change at all.”⁶² What may be hailed as major Islamic feminist victories could be, as shown earlier, mostly insignificant. However, the Guardian Council and a conservative Parliament may be more willing to concede to some secular feminist demands if they did not have the option of less challenging and more flexible Islamic feminist policies.

Future of Women’s Rights in Iran

Where is Iran headed, in terms of gender equality and women’s rights? It is hard to tell. On one hand, the Iranian public has become increasingly vocal about their demands for a less restrictive society. On the other hand, the Iranian state has continued to repress protests with harsh condemnation from its religious leadership and outright violence.

The 2009 Presidential Elections inspired monumental feminist activism and activism in general, closely paralleling the overwhelming activism exactly thirty years prior. The candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi promised to focus on women’s issues and, quite unusually, his wife campaigned heavily alongside him.⁶³ Another candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, suggested appointing a woman to his cabinet, and his “spokeswoman Jamileh Kadivar even openly questioned the mandatory hijab.”⁶⁴ The allure of these reform candidates was so strong that a previously apathetic public showed up in droves to the polls;

⁵⁹ Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 129.

⁶⁰ Barlow, “Prospects for Feminism,” 32.

⁶¹ Gashtili, “Gender Politics,” 129.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶³ Vakil, *Women and Politics*, 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

turnout was an astonishing 85%.⁶⁵ When the incumbent and fairly unpopular candidate, President Ahmadinejad, was declared the victor with an incredible 62% of the vote, the other candidates immediately called for a recount and claimed that the elections were rigged. When the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader reconfirmed that Ahmadinejad had won with the majority of votes, even in the hometowns of the other candidates, urban areas erupted in protest.⁶⁶ When the protester Neda Agha Soltan was shot and her murder became highly publicized, hundreds of women became activists willing to protest the injustices of her death, the elections, and the state itself. The government swiftly took action against disagreeing voices: “thousands of demonstrators and activists were arrested, and an estimated 107 people were killed. Nine months later... the state, through its tactics, had neutralized the opposition,” despite proclaiming the merits of merging Islam with democracy.⁶⁷

This suppression means that oppositional sentiments are festering and growing stronger, not that the government has succeeded in persuading all activists that the status quo is satisfactory. Even after the Green Movement, there have been smaller movements protesting the government’s restrictions. In 2017 and 2018, dozens of women removed their headscarfs in public in form of protest, and many of these women were harassed by the police or arrested.⁶⁸ Although Supreme Leader Khamenei reiterated his belief that women should be modestly dressed, the more moderate President Rouhani released a report stating that 49.8% of Iranian men and women believe that the government should not regulate veiling.⁶⁹ This indicates that both the Iranian public and the elected government are becoming less conservative, or at least less permissive of the religious leadership’s interference.

The possibilities for change are increasing, especially because the Iranian public has more young people and Iran is globalizing. In fact, “65% of Iran’s

⁶⁵ Robert Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Protests Flare in Iran as Opposition Disputes Votes,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Vakil, *Women and Politics*, 201.

⁶⁸ Thomas Erdbrink, “Tired of Their Veils, Some Iranian Women Stage Protests,” *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/world/middleeast/head-scarf-protests-iran-women.html>.

⁶⁹ Thomas Erdbrink, “Compulsory Veils? Half of Iranians Say ‘No’ to Pillar of Revolution,” *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/world/middleeast/iran-hijab-veils.html>.

population is below the age of thirty...Because they are products of this government, their demands for reform cannot credibly be labeled as *gharbzadeh* [Westoxicated].”⁷⁰ Gender equality is just one of the many issues that the legal apparatus of the state affects. The history of feminist activism is evidence that working within the framework of the state has failed repeatedly; in order to accommodate feminism and other reforms, the government structure must evolve to minimize the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader’s overwhelming constitutional power. This is the only way that people can have greater control over what they vote for. Whether these recent protests are successful, as they were in the 1979 Revolution, or suppressed, as they were in the Green Movement, could determine the fate of women’s rights in Iran.

⁷⁰ Osanloo, *Politics of Women’s Rights*, 17.