

# Iranian Women: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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## **Abstract**

Through a summarized historical review; this paper is studying Iranian Women's century long struggle to improve their status in the society and achieve some basic rights such as education and suffrage. The paper demonstrates how the patriarchal system cemented with the male interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence has created strong foundations based on which women have been deserted of many rights for decades. This foundation has resisted change and exhausted positive efforts when progressive statesmen tried to provide women with some developments. Exactly for this reason the Islamic Revolution turned the clock back on women's rights and acted regressively against limited advantages that women had gained in previous decades. Despite frequent draw backs; Iranian women have continued with their struggle for improving their social and legal status. In this struggle, education has proven to be their most effective mean, as it has provided opportunities and strategies for social and political participation, giving the women the voice of reason to argue for their demands and moreover has given them the ability and skills to interpret the Islamic jurisprudence and hence find avenues through which women can be provided with greater rights and privileges. This in term has empowered them to have constructive dialogues and debates on women related issues with jurisconsults and legislators and urge them to review the legal system with a more favorable approach towards women's rights and status. However, so long as the social patriarchal system is intact, any progress would be slow and faced with great challenges.

**Keywords:** Iranian Women, Islamic Jurisprudence, Patriarchal system, Education, Women's status, Women's rights

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## İran Kadını: Bir Adım İleri, İki Adım Geri

### Özet

Özetlenmiş bir tarihsel inceleme yoluyla, bu çalışma toplumdaki statülerini geliştirmek ve eğitim ve oy hakkı gibi bazı temel hakları elde etmek için İran kadınının verdiği yüzyıldan uzun mücadelesini inceliyor. Makale, İslam hukukunun erkek yorumlanması ile sağlamlaşmış ataerkil sistemin nasıl kadınların yıllardır birçok haktan mahrum bırakıldığına dayalı güçlü temeller yarattığını göstermektedir. Bu sistem değişime direndi ve yenilikçi devlet adamlarının kadınlar için bazı gelişmeler sağlamaya çalıştıkları zaman olumlu çabaları tükenmiş oldu. Tam olarak bu nedenle İslam Devrimi kadın hakları üzerinde saati geri döndürdü ve kadınlar önceki yıllarda kazanmış oldukları sınırlı avantajlara karşı regresif davrandılar. Sık sık geri gitmelere rağmen, İranlı kadınlar sosyal ve hukuki statülerinin iyileştirilmesi için verdikleri mücadeleye devam etmişlerdir. Bu mücadelede eğitimin onların en etkili ifade etme yolu olduğu kanıtlanmıştır; eğitim sosyal ve siyasal katılım için fırsatlar ve stratejiler sağlandığı gibi kadınlara kendi isteklerini dile getirebilme ve tartışabilmeleri için güç verdi. Dahası, onlara İslam hukukunu yorumlayabilmeleri için yetenek ve beceri verdi ve böylece kadınlar daha fazla hak ve ayrıcalıkların sağlandığı yollar buldular. Bu, kadınları hukukçular ve milletvekilleri ile ilgili konularda ve meselelerde yapıcı diyalog ve tartışmalar için güçlendirdi ve kadınları kadın hakları ve statüsüne karşı daha olumlu yaklaşılması için hukuk sistemini gözden geçirmeleri için teşvik etti. Fakat, sosyal ataerkil sistem yerinde durduğu müddetçe, herhangi bir ilerleme yavaş olacaktır ve büyük zorluklarla karşı karşıya kalacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İranlı Kadınlar, İslami Hukuk, Ataerkil sistem, Eğitim, Kadınların Statüsü, Kadın Hakları

## المرأة الإيرانية: خطوة إلى الأمام وخطوتان إلى الوراء

### ملخص

تحاول هذه الدراسة، من خلال مراجعة تاريخية مختصرة، دراسة نضال المرأة الطويل على مدار المائة عام الماضية في سبيل تحسين أوضاعها في المجتمع واكتساب بعض الحقوق الأساسية مثل الحق في التعليم والحق في الإقتراع. حيث تستعرض هذه الورقة كيف فتح النظام البطريركي «ولاية الفقيه» الطريق لما يسمي بالتأويل الذكوري للفقهاء الإسلاميين استُحدثت بموجبه مؤسسات تم تكريسها لإهمال العديد من حقوق النساء لعقود طويلة.

حيث عملت هذه المؤسسات على مقاومة التغيير واستنزاف الجهود الإيجابية التي قام بها بعض رجال الدين التحرريين عندما حاولوا دعم النساء ببعض الإصلاحات. ولهذا السبب حركت الثورة الإسلامية عقارب الساعة إلى الوراء بصورة ملحوظة وذلك من أجل الدفاع عن حقوق المرأة، وتصرفت برجعية في مواجهة الامتيازات المحدودة التي اكتسبتها النساء خلال العقود السابقة. وعلى الرغم من الاضطهاد المتكرر، فقد استمرت النساء الإيرانيات في كفاحهن في سبيل تحسين أوضاعهن الاجتماعية والقانونية. وقد نبتت ثمرة هذا الكفاح في مجال التعليم بصورة أكثر فعالية. فمن خلاله أتيحت الفرص ووضعت الإستراتيجيات للمشاركة السياسية والاجتماعية، مانحاً النساء صوت العقل الذي مكنهن من التعبير عن مطالبهن، بل وأعطاهن فوق كل ذلك القدرات والمهارات لتأويل الفقهاء الإسلاميين. ومن هنا فقد وجد السبل التي من خلالها يمكن الحصول على حقوق وامتيازات أكبر. وهذا بدوره قد مكنهن من إجراء حوارات هيكلية (تأسيسية) ومناظرات حول قضايا النساء ذات الصلة مع الفقهاء والمشرعين. وارانهم بشأن مراجعة نهج النظام التشريعي ليكون أكثر إيجابية تجاه حقوق وأوضاع المرأة. وعلى أية حال، فطالماً كان النظام الاجتماعي البطريركي «ولاية الفقيه» مستمراً على وضعه، فإن أي تقدم سيكون بطيئاً وسيواجهه الكثير من التحديات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النساء الإيرانيات، الفقه الإسلاميين، النظام البطريركي، التعليم، أوضاع النساء، حقوق النساء.

## Introduction

For more than a century, Iranian women have been trying to improve their status in the Iranian patriarchal system. This system with added strength from male interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence has grown such strong roots deep in the society's fiber that Iranian women have had to face serious challenges for some of the most basic rights such as access to education or the right to choose the manner of their attire. This paper will demonstrate that influential elites have managed to build a solid barricade from the combination of the above two factors -patriarchal system and Islamic jurisprudence- through which they can seriously challenge or reverse any developments pursued by women or intended by the governments for women, particularly if the governments are either not strong or determined enough. The paper will argue that in the absence of firm belief in equal rights, what progressive politicians were able to provide for women has been more of a lip service than actual tangible improvements. Their approach towards women's role in the society has been more prudential (even instrumental) than out of a deep seated belief which can persuade them to challenge the system (patriarchy cemented with male interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence). Through the review of Iranian women's struggle for their rights, the paper will also argue that as long as the above system remains intact; any progress can prove to be short lived and reversible.

## Setting the Context

While scholars like Kaveh Farrokh provide archeological and historical evidence about the role and authority that Iranian women have had in ancient times,<sup>1</sup> one cannot provide a similar image at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women's place was only in their guardians' house (father, husband) and the only education they would receive was basic religious studies (Quran and Sharia rules) in *maktabs*. Even that limited and basic education was mostly for the middle/upper class girls and not everybody. While 'home' was considered their place and sanctuary, women did not exactly feel secure in their own home within the sacred space of the family. Girls could be forced into arranged marriages at a very young

1 K. Farrokh, *The Persian Lioness: Iranian Women in History*. <http://www.kavehfarrokh.com/iranica/the-women-of-persia/the-persian-lioness-iranian-women-in-history/> (accessed 10 October 2013)

age. Those married; could be divorced by the husband's unilateral decision or had to put up with the husband's polygamy as it was a normal practice of those days. Women were generally perceived as inferiors. The perception was not only from political and legal point, as it had its roots in the culture and society. As Mohammadi explains; "these structural inequalities have their roots in essentialist philosophy and theology, despotism, authoritarian political culture, tribal and patriarchal social system, a special mode of (Asian) agricultural production based on hard work of digging aqua ducts in underground irrigation system (*qanat*) by primitive tools and Islamic shari'ah. These factors have interwoven together."<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Review

### Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907)

The first sparks of change in women's social mood came within the context of 1906 Constitutional Revolution. The atmosphere of change had encouraged people to look for improvements. Increased contact with Europe was an eye opener for educated people and drew their attention to repressive condition of women in the country, and encouraged them to look for solutions to change the situation.<sup>3</sup> While Taj Saltaneh, Naser al-Din Shah's daughter, and Bibi Khanoum Fatema Astarabadi criticized the plight of women in their writings and made efforts towards improvements; famous constitutionalists like Mirza Melkom Khan and Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh "wrote about women's right to education and the evils of polygamy and seclusion."<sup>4</sup>

Organized participation of women in the Tobacco protests followed by the events which resulted in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, demonstrated Iranian women's potential for organizing and participating in collective actions of social or political nature. This in turn encouraged more enlightened women to "use the momentum provided by the revolution as a venue for bringing women's causes into the open."<sup>5</sup>

2 M. Mohammadi, "Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 9, No.1, November 2007, pp.1-21.

3 A. Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century Long Struggle", *The Muslim World*, Vol.94, 2004, pp:427-448.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid, p.428.

While women were exceptionally not banned from participating in demonstrations and other activities relevant to Constitutional Revolution; when the revolution succeeded, its religious leaders preferred to overlook the important role women played towards this victory. Women's role in building human shield for the clergies who had taken sanctuary in holy places were completely ignored and forgotten together with the social maturity they demonstrated during the revolution. Along with minors, criminals and mentally ill; women were denied suffrage by the electoral law.<sup>6</sup> They were told "their education and training should be restricted to raising children, home economics and preserving the honor of the family."<sup>7</sup> From the view point of leaders such as Shaykh Fazlullah Nuri and Seyyed Ali Shushtari, schooling for girls was detrimental to women's status and against religious principles. These *ulama* conveniently forgot that the prophet Muhammad has declared it a compulsory duty for every Muslim man and woman to search for knowledge from birth till death. Women were sent back home with no obvious improvements in their status.

Nevertheless, education remained a top agenda for activists. Initially in 1907 the first girl's primary school was founded by Bibi Khattoon Astarabadi, in her own residence. In a short time considerable number of girls' school was established in various large cities and gradually the issue lost its stigma. In 1918 the first Teacher Education College for girls was founded in Tehran.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, "despite lack of interest in women's concerns on the part of parliament, women did remain involved in national politics, particularly opposing the intervention of both British and Russian forces who had joined the Shah in trying to close the parliament. They also continued raising funds to set up the first Iranian National Bank in order to free Iran's economy and government from the stranglehold of British influence."<sup>9</sup> In 1912, William Murgan Shuster, the American Treasurer General of Persia wrote "Persian women since 1907 have become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world. That this statement upsets the ideas of centuries makes no difference... Having themselves suffered from a double

6 R. Noshirvani, *Iranian Women in the Era of Modernisation: a Chronology*, (Foundation for Iranian Studies, 2009). <http://www.fisiran.org/en/women/milestones/pre-revolution> (accessed 5 October 2013)

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 H. Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroad of Secularization and Islamization*, (The Women's Movement Series, 1999), p.113.

form of oppression, political and social... they broke through some of the most sacred customs which for centuries past have bound their sex in the land of Persia."<sup>10</sup>

### Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941)

An authoritarian leader keen on modernizing his country; Reza shah (1924-1941) took steps in improving women's status while trying to channel their demands into welfare and social dimensions, and away from politics. His emphasis on women's education as a facilitator for modernization of the society resulted in the increased number of girls' school and employment of educated women as teachers. Moreover, from 1928 he provided financial support for women to study abroad.<sup>11</sup> In 1931, the government introduced a number of changes in the marriage and divorce laws. Marriage was placed under civil rather than religious jurisdiction.<sup>12</sup> In 1935, a bill was passed in the parliament (*Majles*) that gave women the right to ask for divorce under certain conditions. The bill set the minimum marriage age for girls at 15 and for boys at 18. The registration of marriage became compulsory, and that in turn reduced *mutah* or temporary marriage practiced by the Shia. Since it could not be legally registered, "it was socially ostracized and become less prevalent."<sup>13</sup> This legislation, according to Amin, proved to be far more important than any other changes introduced by Reza Shah's government in later periods.<sup>14</sup> As Cronin argues, if it wasn't for Reza Shah's determined efforts, "the *ulama* would have not voluntarily acquiesced in, but have frustrated any attempts to extend women's rights and opportunities."<sup>15</sup> Fortunately for women, Reza Shah felt strong enough to face *ulama*'s opposition and challenge the resistance of traditional approach towards women to some degree.

Nonetheless, to leave his patriarchic hallmark on the country's modernization process; Reza Shah decided to impose modernization of the nation's attire. Following a 1928 parliamentary bill on

10 A. Mostashari, *One Hundred Years of Women's Movements in Iran*, (MIT Iranian Studies Group). [isgmit.org/projectsstorage/WomenStudies/WomenMovementsInIran.ppt](http://isgmit.org/projectsstorage/WomenStudies/WomenMovementsInIran.ppt) (accessed 20 March 2013).

11 R. Noshirvani, *Iranian Women in the Era of Modernisation*.

12 S. Cronin, *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003)

13 Ibid, p.193

14 As quoted by Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement", p.430.

15 S. Cronin, *The Making of Modern Iran*, p.197.

public Servants attire, in 1936 the traditional women's *hijab* were outlawed (de-veiling). The new dress code was brutally enforced by the police. Ironically, the de-veiling law was in a way counter-productive to Reza Shah's efforts for modernizing women. Since female students of Tehran University were the first group of women to be obliged by this; religious leaders were provided by an evidence to prove that education is corruptive for women. Also, many women specially from middle and lower classes of the society, living in more traditional environments had to relinquish all their social activities even as simple as doing their own shopping as they could not go out without *hijab*. "The de-veiling law and its harsh enforcement not only failed to liberate women of these classes, but sequestered them and forced them to rely on their husbands, sons, and male relatives for public tasks which they normally carried out themselves."<sup>16</sup>

### **Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1978)**

While the enforcement of de-veiling was relaxed after the forced abdication of Reza Shah in favor of his son Mohamad Reza, it still remained legal; leaving veiled women excluded from public sector employment. From 1951, women's calls for equal political and economic rights was renewed, but got nowhere as the young Shah was trying to avoid confrontation with the *ulama*. However, after the 1953 coup and repression of various opposition groups, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was feeling much stronger for undertaking further modernization of the country despite the opposition. Therefore, in 1963 as part of his White Revolution women were given the right to vote and be voted for the parliament seats. "30 years after the recognition of Turkish women's right to vote and participate in parliamentary politics, yet it met with considerable opposition from the Iranian clergy, including Ayatollah Khomeini himself, who viewed this as the complete corruption of Muslim morals."<sup>17</sup>

"In 1967, the parliament passed the Family Planning Act (revised in 1975) that gave women rights in dissolving the marriage and circumscribed the unilateral rights of men to dissolve marriage."<sup>18</sup> The Act set more constraints for polygamy; raised the age for girls

16 H. Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran*, p.15

17 Ibid, p.19,

18 A. Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran*, (Princeton University Press, 2009)



marriage to 18, put divorce under the authority of family courts and created safeguards against male vagary in divorce.<sup>19</sup> Following the 1975 revision, the family law gave women custody rights and eased the abortion law. Parallel to developments in the legal status of women, “the state continued to increase the number of women in executive positions, enhance their opportunities in the public arena, and appoint women as judges ..... In the same year, women’s affairs gained ministerial status and a woman was appointed to the position.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Post Islamic Revolution Era**

The Islamic revolution of 1978-9, once again witnessed the pervasive participation of Iranian women from all walks of life in the political developments of the country. Women from different backgrounds and ideologies took to the streets alongside men, looking for an end to dictatorship. In March 1979, the first post revolution election was held, through which 98.8% of the participants voted in favor of an ‘Islamic Republic’. While the high turnout of the public and their positive vote demonstrated their interest in having a republic in which Islamic rules and moralities were observed; further developments proved that what many people had in mind was not the same interpretation of Islam that the religious leaders of the revolution had. It also proved that even the leaders who later became the country’s statesmen were not homogenous in their vision of an Islamic government and the sort of rules which would be applied. “Women’s status” is a stark example of this reality. In a statement responding to enquiries regarding women’s status in an Islamic state; Ayatullah Khomeini explained “the Islamic regime would restore dignity and real social worth to women. He emphasized that Islam has never been against women’s freedom.”<sup>21</sup> While the statement sounded positive, it was ambiguous enough to leave room for later interpretations and adjustments.

As the Islamic Republic stabilized, it turned out that women were once again only reserve players in a male dominated game. Now that the revolution was over, based on the conviction that women are naturally unwise and unequal, new legislations were enforced

19 Paydar as quoted by Mahdi, “The Iranian Women’s Movement”, p.433

20 Mahdi, “The Iranian Women’s Movement”, p.433

21 Nobari as quoted by Hoodfar, *The Women’s Movement in Iran*, p.23.

upon which women were excluded from many legal rights, while “equally subject to the harsh treatment of the current laws of retribution - *qassas*.”<sup>22</sup> Discrimination against women was and still is institutionalized through constitution, government policies and state ideology. “For instance, Article 19 of the constitution states: *The people of Iran regardless of ethnic and tribal origin enjoy equal rights. Color, race, language, and the like will not be cause for privilege.* Note that while discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and race is prohibited, neither religion nor sex is mentioned.”<sup>23</sup>

Shortly after the victory of the revolution, women were excluded from military and judiciary jobs and “female students were barred from the School of Law.”<sup>24</sup> Despite early promises of religious statesmen and despite all oppositions and criticisms, in June 1980, the Islamic dress code (*hijab*) was imposed on women which was applied even on minorities. Many women, who resisted *hijab* or other revolutionary principles, were dismissed from their jobs.

Developments affecting women’s status happened faster and were more extreme in the judiciary arena. Just two weeks after the official establishment of the Islamic Republic in March 1979; Pahlavi’s Family Protection Law was annulled and the illegal practice of temporary marriage became legal. Also the legal age of maturity was lowered for girls to nine and for boys to 14, and the rule was enshrined in the constitution. This was interpreted to mean that girls could be given in marriage at the age of nine, the legal age at which they are punishable as adults for any criminal offense”.<sup>25</sup> Despite protests by some middle class and more educated women “the unbelievably discriminatory laws were passed with ease. Among other things, the value of women’s lives legally became half that of men ..... and a notoriously misogynistic orthodox Muslim family law was introduced.”<sup>26</sup> The new law “gave men an absolute right to divorce their wives without having to produce any justification. Child custody laws were also changed in favor of men: after divorce,

22 H. Afshar, *Women, State and Ideology: Studies from Africa and Asia*, (N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1987).

23 N. Tohidi, “Iran” in Kelly, S. & Breslin, J. (eds.), *Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance*, (Freedom House, 2010), p.124

24 H. Afshar, *Women, State and Ideology*, p.42

25 Kar and Hoodfar as quoted by Hoodfar, *The Women’s Movement in Iran*, p. 23

26 H. Hoodfar & Sadeghi, F., “Against All Odds: The Women’s Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran” in *Development*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2009, pp, 215–223.

women are entitled to keep their boys only up to the age of two and girls until seven".<sup>27</sup> The changes in Family Law could indirectly limit women's social and political activity. It does not matter how high is a woman's rank in the politics or society, she does not feel safe if her husband can unilaterally divorce and take her children away. This would clearly provide a strong leverage for men to control their wives according to their wishes.

Based on Iranian interpretation of jurisprudence; "If a man murders a woman he cannot be punished unless her relatives pay a *dyeh* (blood money) to the murderer (Qassas law 18.6.61, article 6). Furthermore, a father who murders his children is 'excused' from punishment provided he pays *dyeh* to heirs (Qassas law, article 16); but no specific *dyeh* is stipulated for children. Mothers, however, do not benefit from this right to life and death of their offspring".<sup>28</sup> Despite claims of the legal system being based on *Sharia*, one can find many cases of contradiction with clear instructions of Quran. For example "Women's evidence is not accepted by Iranian courts, unless accompanied by that of a man. Women, who, nevertheless, insist on giving evidence without male corroboration, are liable to punishment for slander (Qassas law, article 92)..... This refusal to accept women's evidence is a contradictory interpretation of the clear Qoranic statement which accepts women's evidence, but equates that of two women with the words of one man".<sup>29</sup>

The picture is not that gloomy in all areas though. Unlike many traditional clergies and in contrast to some of his own old views; once in power, Ayatollah Khomeini encouraged Islamist women's political and social activities and criticized the opposition of the traditionalists. "The leader of the Revolution considered such participation of women crucial and on many occasions he praised and nominated them 'the lion-hearted ones whose great efforts saved Islam from the captivity of the foreigners [and] who alongside men secured the victory of Islam'. He also endorsed women's political rights as a religious duty: *Women have the right to intervene in politics. It is their duty.....Islam is a political religion. In Islam, everything, even prayer, is political*".<sup>30</sup> Some argue that the reason for Ayatollah Khomeini's

27 Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement", p.434

28 H. Afshar, *Women, State and Ideology*, p.42.

29 Ibid

30 H. Moinifar, "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity", *GEMC Journal*, No.4, 2013, p.30.

change of heart regarding women's suffrage was the positive role they could play in favor of his Islamic politics.

Women's education was particularly encouraged, to such degree that even old women took on themselves to learn basic literacy. This was in fact the golden master key which more than a decade later women started to use for opening the locks that the patriarchic system has imposed on their life. In addition to state's encouragement of women's education; a more indirect effect of the revolution and establishment of an Islamic Republic was the fact that when the society, including schools and universities became 'Islamic', a great majority of more traditional and religious families who would have not let their daughters to attend school or university in fear of corruption and losing their faith; were relieved of their worries and trusted the state to provide a suitable environment for their daughter's education. Consequently female literacy rate increased from 35% in the 1976, to 52% by 1986 despite all the challenges that the country was facing following the revolution and the imposed war with Iraq. "Today, Iranian girls between the ages of 15 and 24 enjoy near universal literacy".<sup>31</sup> Women's level of education has also improved considerably. "For example, the female enrollment rate for primary education institutions is actually higher than it is for males. Women also graduate from their primary education programs at the same rate as their male counterparts".<sup>32</sup> Since late 1990's women constitute more than 60% of university entrants. "Based on official statistics about 65% of accepted students at the universities were female compared to 35% male in fall 2010".<sup>33</sup> Over the time, this has in turn resulted in increased employment of women. According to the British historian, Michael Axworthy ; "one-third of doctors, 60 percent of civil servants, and 80 percent of teachers in Iran are women".<sup>34</sup> More than three decades after the revolution women's status has improved gradually but considerably in many areas. This was mainly due to the work of all women and men from different walks of life who challenged the system and made efforts for improvements. Education became an important vehicle in this context.

31 F. Samanian, "The Slow Rise of Iranian Women", *The Diplomat*, 22 September 2013. Retrieved on 09.10.2013 from: <http://thediplomat.com/2013/09/22/the-slow-rise-of-iran-women/> (accessed 9 October 2013)

32 Ibid

33 Moinifar, "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity" , p.25

34 As quoted by Moinifar, "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity".

## End of War and the Construction Era (1988-1997)

Most of the above mentioned positive developments happened after the end of Iran-Iraq war. For 8 years, all of the state's resources were focused on war and it was not possible to pay appropriate attention to women's demands and problems. "Indeed, during the war, the government was devoid of specific economic, social, and cultural policies on women, to the extent that women had no place in the First (Development) Plan, implemented during the war".<sup>35</sup> Yet, verbal privileges were bestowed on them as mothers and wives who devotionally sent their sons and husbands to war and provided support for men in front.

The 1988 end of war which was used by political elites as justification for all shortcomings, brought about the era of reconstruction. A significant development in this era was emphasis on the importance of "proficiency"; where as in the immediate aftermath of the revolution commitment to Islamic and revolutionary principles was the prime factor for anybody to get appointed for a job. The appointee's level of proficiency was not of so much importance as his/her adherence to revolutionary ideals. During the construction era; realizing the need for their proficiency, many female specialists who were dismissed due to their opposition to revolutionary principles (i.e. *hijab*) were let back to their posts.

The number of female MPs in the fourth round of parliament assembled in the construction era was doubled compared to the previous three rounds. "In addition to their numerical increase, they were also more educated than their predecessors; some were active as professionals prior to their election."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, they were mostly passive and lacked confidence in pursuing bills which could help improving women's condition in the male dominated Iranian parliament, so much that next term female candidates criticized them openly and promised their constituency that they would take a more proactive approach towards women's issues. These candidates who were often highly educated and vocal, represented "a new generation of Islamist women technocrats whose ongoing interaction with the Islamist state and an emerging civil society has led them to perceive politics as a potent and necessary activity to-

35 A. Kian, *Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: the Gender Conscious Drive to Change*, 1999. <http://www.wluml.org/node/323> (accessed 10 October 2013)

36 Ibid

wards the acquisition of women's rights."<sup>37</sup> The end of the war also diluted the securitized atmosphere which had overwhelmed the society, preventing serious debates and criticisms on the basis that it would be abused by the enemy or affect the morale of men in the front line. Publication of several new magazines, newspapers etc. provided the opportunity for more informed debates on various issues including those related to women.

Due to lack of women's representatives in high ranking government positions, the Office of Women's Affairs, an offshoot of the presidential bureau was established in 1992 with the mission to detect problems and shortcomings and to propose solutions to ameliorate women's status and their economic, social, cultural and political role. This was followed by the 1998 establishment of the Social and Cultural Council of Women to promote women's economic and social activity under the auspices of the High Council of Cultural Revolution, chaired by President Rafsanjani. Most scholars, who have studied Iranian women's post revolution movement and conditions agree that the tiny plant of Iranian women's movement accelerated its growth during the reconstruction era, and flourished during the reform era. According to statistics, the number of female managers in public services increased by 63% from 1989 to 2004.<sup>38</sup>

#### **Reform Era (1997-2005)**

The reform era started with the presidency of Hujatol Islam Khatami who took the office in 1997, on the platform of highly popular vote particularly by women and youth. "In this sense the 1997 election marked the political coming of age of Iranian women."<sup>39</sup> His government was the first since the revolution to include female members as well. The Head of Environmental Protection Department with the rank of vice- president and the Head of the Center for Women's Participation in the rank of president's advisor, were the two taboo-breaking administration members.

An interesting trend in the reform era was the development of new concepts and definitions in various areas such as *Dialogue Among Civilizations* in the arena of international relations. This trend was the result of increased interaction between intellectuals and policy makers. As a result of such interactions the definition of the *'ideal*

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37 Ibid

38 Moinifar, "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity", p.30.

39 H. Hoodfar & Sadeghi, F., "Against All Odds: The Women's Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran".

woman' was evolved from the minimalist picture drawn by conservatives, which is much closer to a housemaid to a maximalist image portrayed by reformists. According to this image "the ideal female citizen of Iran is one who successfully responds to the demands of a traditional, Islamizing society while preparing herself for the exigencies of modernization and the commands of a revolutionary society. The *new Muslim woman* is, therefore, one who abides by the forces of tradition by assuming her role and responsibilities as wife and mother, acting as the "pivot" of the home and agent of stability in the family. Meanwhile, she is expected to be a responsible member of the society, involved in socio-political affairs."<sup>40</sup>

Khatami's support for the development of civil society paved the way for the expansion and further activation of numerous nongovernmental organizations, including those which focused on women or issues related to them. "The number of registered women's NGOs rose from 67 in 1997 to 480 in 2005".<sup>41</sup> Establishment of *city and local councils* was another strategy undertaken by Khatami's administration to enhance the role of civil society in the running of the country. This provided women with another opportunity to increase their political presence in the society. "In 2005, 11% of all elected city council representatives were women."<sup>42</sup> The social environment became more relaxed, providing opportunity for open debates and discussions of women's problems through different media; from published books and journals, to conferences, various art platforms such as film, theatre and paintings.

Through these media, state policies towards women were questioned as "patriarchy in Islamic clothing."<sup>43</sup> Since the male interpretation of Islamic sources were used (or rather abused) to strip women of their most basic rights; religious female activists who had by then specialized in religious studies as well as their own field of proficiency, managed to inform the public of a rather different view of Islam towards women based on authentic religious sources such as Quran and Hadith. Through this strategy they override the monopoly of interpretation from male jurists, and managed

40 G. Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: A Paradox of Tradition and Modernity" in *Middle Eastern women on the Move: Openings for and the Constraints on Women's Political Participation in the Middle East*. (2001), pp:69-75.

41 Z. Mir Hosseini, "Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?", *MERIP Report*, 2006. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061606> (accessed 11 October 2013).

42 Moinifar, "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity", p.30.

43 Hoodfar as quoted by Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement", p. 440.



to convince more open minded legislators and authorities to review previous legislations concerning women and submit bills for improving women's status. "Women, working in different arenas and with varied voices and tactics, cleverly used the conflict between various political factions within the clerical establishment to their advantage by pitting one set of religious interpretation of texts against the other, one faction of *ulama* against the other, and lay intellectuals against the clerics. They questioned prevailing gender segregation, unequal division of labor, widespread domestic violence, and the organizational and exploitative biases within the Iranian Islamic family."<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, efforts in improving the legal status of women did not bear much fruit. "The reformist-dominated Sixth Majles (2000-2004) passed many bills in women's favor, though most -- including the proposal to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) -- were rejected by the Guardian Council, the unelected clerical body constitutionally empowered to veto legislation for adherence to *Islamic* principles."<sup>45</sup>

In the cold atmosphere of frustration, came the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the female Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi, the famous women's and children's activist which demonstrated the highest international recognition of Iranian women's movement was reinvigorating not only for all women activists; but also for the whole Iranian civil society which had become exhausted by systematic challenges and pressures.

### **Destruction Era (2005-2013)**

With the election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in June 2005, the hard liners returned to power once again. Prior to that, they had already won the 7<sup>th</sup> round of parliament elections. With their return to power, "women generally fared poorly on several fronts. The momentum for change built up over the previous 16 years virtually evaporated."<sup>46</sup> However, an important fact that should be kept in mind is that by the end of Ahmadinejad's two terms presidency, the country is in ruins from every important aspect. Due to mismanagement, widespread corruptions, and increased sanctions the economy is on the verge of collapse. According to the newly appointed president,

<sup>44</sup> Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement, pp. 440-441.

<sup>45</sup> Mir Hosseini, "Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?"

<sup>46</sup> H. Esfandiari, "The Women's Movement" in Wright, R (ed.) *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, (United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010).



the treasury is empty with the savings swept away.<sup>47</sup> As a result of a confrontational approach in its international affairs during Ahmadinejad's administration; Iran has become more isolated than ever since the end of war with Iraq. The situation in other areas is not better, if not worse. Therefore, calling this period as 'destruction era' does not seem unfair, nor hyperbole considering the disastrous outcome of his eight years governance and the reversal of many considerable developments achieved in the post revolution era, in this period. Issues related to women have not been an exception in the whole trend of developments in the country.

Initially either to appease women by portraying a female friendly image of his administration, or to disguise his excessive discriminatory approach towards women, or may be with other political goals in mind, Ahmadinejad issued a directive to let female fans enter the stadiums for football matches; a directive which was attacked by clergies and vetoed by conservative elements of the state. However, it was not long before his government showed its true color. *Zanan*, the famous feminist magazine was closed down. The number of women city and local councilors dropped dramatically, and so did the number of women MP's.<sup>48</sup> In his election campaign, Ahmadinejad had not made any promises considering women's rights and his promise of spreading social justice never came close to reality even if it was meant for women as well as men. However, he had emphasized that women's *hijab* would not be an issue of scrutiny. Nevertheless, just a few months into his government, the police crackdown on women with attires deemed inappropriate by the government started. For several years women have been stopped by the police, getting warnings or being penalized for not observing appropriate dress code. Furthermore, "the Presidential Office for Women became the *Presidential Office for Women and Family*, changing the name and goals of the only governmental institution devoted to female issues." Adding the word 'Family' was an indication of new direction of the office and the government's view of women's role in the society, "downplaying female participation in the workplace and even in politics."<sup>49</sup>

47 President Rohani's Tehran University speech for students, 15 October 2013.

48 Ibid

49 A. Akbari, "Prospect for Reform? the Iranian Elections; the Women's Movement: an Emerging Power" in Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.), *IDEAS reports - strategic updates*, (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009)

As the rate of female university entrants reached 65% compared to that of 35% for men, new restrictions have been applied on the courses which could be studied by female students and their choice of universities since 2006, apparently to curtail the negative consequences of gender imbalance in education. Moreover, the new “Family Protection Act” which the Ahmedinejad government submitted to the parliament in 2008, would have taken away the limited legal protections that women had as it would have provided greater freedom for men to commit polygamy or look for temporary marriage. However, the proposal was faced with such an uproar from women in all levels of the society, seculars as well as religious and with such serious criticism even from intellectual men; that was not passed by the parliament.

Following the 2009 controversial election and securitization of the country; women’s movements were further hampered by systematic restrictions such as denying necessary permits to hold peaceful public demonstrations. Women’s rights advocates were frequently charged with “endangering national security” and “contributing to the enemy’s propaganda against the regime.” The authorities have pointed to real or supposed foreign funding as evidence that civic groups are involved in a U.S.-led plan for “regime change.”<sup>50</sup>

The only development which seemed positive for women was the fact that for the first time after the revolution, a woman was appointed as the government’s minister. However, the appointment was cleverly designed to keep conflicting sides happy. While trying to send a positive signal to those who were pushing for promotion of women’s status in the society; the appointee had a history of conservative approach towards women related issues. Dr. Dastjerdi, the female Minister of Health, had supported bills which stripped women of their rights to get divorced, have custody of their children after divorce, or have an abortion when she was a member of parliament. Nevertheless, following her serious criticisms of the government for the allocation of budgets for medicine imports; she was released from service by Ahmadinejad.

In 2012, a new bill was passed in the parliament upon which travel restrictions were imposed on single women under the age of 40. The new passport law “required single women up to the age of

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50 Tohidi, “Iran”.

40 to obtain official permission from their father or male guardian before they could acquire foreign travel documents”.<sup>51</sup> Married women are already obliged to have their husband’s official consent for travelling abroad. The bill was viewed as yet another attack on women’s basic rights and triggered serious opposition from women and women’s rights activists. Eventually in Feb 2013 the head of parliament’s Women and Family Committee, announced the cancellation of the controversial bill.

### **The Era of Prudence & Hope (2013-Present)**

Following his much celebrated victory in June, Rohani took the office in August 2013 and introduced his government of ‘prudence and hope’ under extremely difficult domestic and international circumstances, which was partly described in the above section. In his campaign, he had spoken against gender discrimination “and said women and men should enjoy the same rights and opportunities” and had “promised to establish a Women’s Affairs Ministry.”<sup>52</sup>

In July 2013 in a meeting with two representatives of then the president elect, “a group of prominent Iranian women’s rights activists and intellectuals have outlined some of their main demands..... To improve the circumstances of women, they said, Rohani should take a number of steps, including ending the country’s “security atmosphere,” removing restrictions on women’s public life, and eliminating censorship on women’s issues.”<sup>53</sup> While the absence of any female minister in his cabinet disappointed some activists, out of eleven deputies the president has, three are women. Just a few months into Rohani’s administration; like other parts of the society, Iranian women seem to be aware that under present dire international and economic circumstances of the country, there are more crucial issues at stake and any improvements in their status, will need time and patience as well as perseverance on their part.

51 “Proposed Bill To Limit Iranian Women’s Travel Reportedly Canceled”, *Radio Free Europe*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-bill-restrict-women-travel/24910177.html> (accessed 17 October 2013).

52 G. Esfandiari, “Women’s Rights Activists Tell Rohani What They Want”, *Radio Free Europe*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-rohani-women-demands/25045159.html> (accessed 17 October 2013).

53 Ibid

## Conclusion

Like a small river which patiently yet steadily opens its way among the solid rocks, Iranian women have tried for more than a century to improve their status and find the place they deserve in the Iranian's male dominated patriarchal society. In this path neither the ignorance of revolutionaries nor the repressions of authoritarian regimes have managed to marginalize their active social and political presence. They have carried on their efforts despite all disappointments, challenges and dangers.

Through review of Iranian women's history of struggle for their rights the paper demonstrated that since 'equal rights' has not been institutionalized on the Iranian mindset to a degree that can seriously challenge the discriminatory principles based on patriarchic system, most governments have had an instrumental approach towards women; facilitating their cause when it suited them and forgetting their basic rights when it did not.

This in term leaves room for the argument that no matter what type of government is running the country, so long as the patriarchal structure remains intact acquiring equal rights will be a long battle if not a distant dream in which, each step forward is challenged by the agencies of the patriarchal system. Without fundamental developments in such system, any progress can be reversed by change of governments and circumstances (i.e. Post revolution developments and destruction era changes). Therefore the most logical long term strategy to guarantee women's rights is to change the underlying patriarchal system of the society through various means including education, raising awareness and internalizing values which help to overcome this system in the upbringing of new generations.

Such change could not of course happen overnight, but it can be accelerated by various means. Among these means and even of most importance is 'education'. As demonstrated in this paper, the increased rate and level of education provided Iranian women with further opportunities for social and political participation. Although still relatively limited; but some even managed to get to high ranking managerial and influential positions both in public and private sectors which consequently gave them the opportunity to call and push for further change. On the other hand, through education religious women activists were able to review and interpret

religious teachings based on scholarly methods and consequently pose serious questions to male interpretations of Islamic teachings. Through this practice they provided legislators with alternative legal options. Though in many cases legislator's effort for introducing legal amendments more favorable to women has been futile in the face of rejections by the conservative men only 'Guardian Council' (i.e. during reform era); approved cases has given hope for further efforts.

New generations of Iranian women with higher levels of education and socio-political involvement, cannot comply with the subordinate status that the patriarchic system expects them to. Moreover, new debates on religious teachings have raised their awareness regarding various laws which are supposedly *shariah* based. This has enabled them to question the authenticity of these laws and challenge legislators for further reviews.

As Massialas has argued, when the system is not congenial with the education or other social agencies, it has to change or it will collapse.<sup>54</sup> As the present Iranian socio-political system based on the combination of patriarchy and male interpreted jurisprudence is becoming increasingly uncongenial to new generations, particularly of women; change is the only option left for survival, and women have become agents of many changes in this system.

<sup>54</sup> B. Massialas, "Education and Political Development", *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2/3, The State of the Art, Jun. - Oct.1977, pp. 274-295.

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