

MUSLIM WOMEN AND AGENCY: CHANGING RELIGIOUS PATTERNS

A CASE STUDY OF TURKISH AND IRANIAN WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the lives of lower-middle-class traditional-religious Muslim Women in the Middle East, with an emphasis on women in Ankara and Tehran. This article seeks to show the opposite aspects of current theories that show the concept of agency is typically useful to the upper middle classes, vice versa submission and obedience are characteristics typically used to describe the lower middle classes. In addition, Studies in the field of religion and women consider the emancipation of women from the structure of patriarchy and the challenge of the beliefs and interpretations of traditional Islam to belong to the upper class and elite of society. The results revealed that these women often did not think and act regarding social, cultural, traditional, and religious expectations as passive, and submissive personality but they looked for redistribution of their facilities and opportunities and also gain internal independence while they were conscious of what is going on in their current situation. Furthermore, they have not used religion as a tool to expand their empowerment opportunities, but they have challenged traditional Islam and the interpretations that have tried to suppress them with the help of patriarchy for long years. They have inadvertently opened the space for the entry of religious intellectualism thoughts into their practical everyday life. Indirect opposition to the laws that have a jurisprudential basis has caused women to go beyond the stage of resistance, and this opposition as an intangible struggle has been able to change aspects of their lives.

Keywords: Agency, Muslim Women, Religious, Turkey, Iran.

MÜSLÜMAN KADINLAR VE GÜÇLENDİRME: DEĞİŞEN DİNİ KALIPLAR, TÜRK VE İRANLI KADINLAR ÜZERİNE BİR ÖRNEK OLAY İNCELEMESİ

ÖZ

Ortadoğu'daki alt-orta sınıf geleneksel-dindar Müslüman kadınların yaşamlarını Ankara ve Tahran'daki kadınlar başta olmak üzere araştırdık. Bu makale, güçlendirme kavramının tipik olarak üst orta sınıflar için yararlı olduğunu, tam tersini ise teslimiyet ve itaatin alt orta sınıfları tanımlamak için tipik olarak kullanılan özellikler olduğunu gösteren mevcut teorilerin zıt yönlerini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca din ve kadın alanındaki çalışmalar, kadınların ataerkil yapıdan özgürleşmesini ve geleneksel İslam inanç ve yorumlarının toplumun üst sınıfına ve seçkinlerine ait olma konusundaki meydan okumasını ele almaktadır. Sonuçlar, bu kadınların çoğu zaman sosyal, kültürel, geleneksel ve dini beklentileri pasif ve itaatkâr bir kişilik olarak düşünüp hareket etmediklerini, ancak olanak ve fırsatların yeniden dağıtımını aradıklarını ve aynı zamanda neyin ne olduğunun bilincinde olarak iç bağımsızlık kazandıklarını ortaya çıkardı. Şu anki durumlarıyla devam ediyor. Üstelik dini, güçlenme fırsatlarını genişletmek için bir araç olarak kullanmadılar, ancak geleneksel İslam'a ve ataerkilliğin yardımıyla onları bastırmaya çalışan yorumlara uzun yıllar boyunca meydan okudular. Onlar istemeden de olsa dini entelektüalizm düşüncelerinin günlük pratik yaşamlarına girmesine alan açmışlardır. Hukuki

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temeli olan yasalara dolaylı muhalefet, kadınların direniş aşamasının ötesine geçmesine neden olmuş ve bu karşıtlık, soyut bir mücadele olarak hayatlarının bazı yönlerini değiştirebildi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müslüman Kadınlar, Güçlendirme, Din, Türk, İran.

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INTRODUCTION

The agency has been defined based on intentionality, independence, and authority, features that are usually not used for describing Muslim religious women (Burke 2012). Researchers still believe there is not enough knowledge about the definitions of women's agency for Muslim women of non-Western conservative regions such as the Middle East (Yount 2005; Qutteina 2019). Because they face a variety of norms and values based on their societies that might be completely different from the Western cultures and their impressions regarding subjects such as gender rules (Qutteina 2019). Focusing on determining Muslim women's agency could have an important role in complex arguments and their development concerning gender in non-Western societies. Just like Saba Mahmood had said, this is something beyond simple proof of subjugation and patriarchy (Mahmood 2001).

Nicola Pratt mentioned in the preface of "Agency and Gender in Gaza: Masculinity, Femininity, and Family during the Second Intifada"¹, the voices of women are usually shut down and considered as victims of violence and patriarchy unless they match the liberal views on the definition agency (Irving 2016). This exaggeration could be caused by the overemphasis of some researchers on the viewpoints of interpreters regarding Islamic theological sources that show women as obedient, passive, and inferior.

Pushing aside these shells and seeing the truth was a truly difficult task, especially when years and years of sediment layers from a certain outlook have fully covered it. Without any doubt focusing on such views and spreading them not only affects the views of researchers but it makes the lives of Islamic women more difficult and frustrating. The new focus on the agency of women during the past few decades has created important corrections in these studies, although these

¹ Written by Aitemad Muhanna.

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subjects are limited to stereotypical subjects such as Hijab and religious corrections (Sehlikoglu 2018) but all of them are efforts to return the unheard voice of women in analyzing Middle Eastern societies as active agents with lives that are much richer and more complex compared to previously available narratives.

This paper, on the one hand, follows the views of Saba Mahmoud, who does not consider religion as a means of oppressing women but goes beyond Mahmoud. On the other hand, contrary to what Mir Hosseini and Friedel argue about the impact of women's social status on the interpretation and use of religion, it shows that pious traditional Muslim women have not only used religion as a tool to expand their empowerment opportunities but have also challenged traditional interpretations of Islam that have suppressed them with the help of patriarchy for many years. The subject of challenging traditional Islam and patriarchy, which Mir Hosseini suggests is reserved for the elite and minority women with higher education, is approached differently here. Unlike Mir-Hosseini's perspective, this paper does not limit such actions to the elite minority of educated women (Mir-Hosseini 2006); Additionally, Friedel believes that religion can be considered a factor for power to the extent that women can use the explanations, meanings, and interpretations of religious language for their independent actions in the form of clever plans and ideas.

The presence of women outside the home for the purpose of worship and the implementation of religious advice, which increases women's participation and networking between them, and increases the space for self-knowledge and understanding of themselves and those around them (Fridle 1994). In the continuation of these discussions, the questions arise whether religious women of the traditional and lower classes also have the ability to reinterpret religion in their daily lives? How do these women reinterpret traditional religion and apply it in their lives without knowing the sources of religious modernism?

Background

So far, different currents of thought have presented various views of Muslim women. In recent decades, researchers have shifted their focus towards examining the agency of women within Gender-Traditional Religions. Western liberal thought tends to define agency based on activities of resistance against domination or social norms, rather than actions conforming to social norms and disciplinary frameworks. In reality, agency consists of two components: resistance against

subjugation (Mahmood 2005: 5; Bilge 2010; Lazreg 2013; Muhanna 2020), and the individual's duality within a society grounded in the humanist idea of authority (Chapman 2015). Butler² believes that their agency is actualized under cultural coercion (Chapman 2015). Liberal feminists perceive women's subjugation as resulting from legal and customary restrictions that hinder their participation in public spheres. This approach involves studying women's family and work lives in the context of different experiences of discrimination and gender stereotypes. This group attributes the persistence of men's authority to patriarchy, which they deem an inappropriate system. Their viewpoint is rooted in the ongoing oppression of women due to their gender and reproductive capabilities. Liberal feminists pay particular attention to issues such as motherhood, coerced interest in the opposite sex, rape, pornography, and domestic violence (Kandiyoti 1996: 4). The liberal feminist tradition connects the voluntary surrender and submission argument with false consciousness (Bilge 2010) and considers agency as resistance against the dominance of men. Some researchers analyzed the differences related to resistance by stepping away from narratives that only emphasized the oppression of women in the Islamic world (Werbner 2018; Vintges 2012; Gallagher 2007; Abu-Lughod 2002; Deeb 2006). Some experimental studies³ analyzed the resistance activities of women based on their relationships with family networks and using religious rituals. These studies claim this is how women resist the male domination of the patriarchy, while others⁴ claim women have only compromised with the patriarchy system (Muhanna 2020).

Mahmood's work pioneered this new thinking flow (Sehlikoglu 2018). She talks about the movement of Egyptian women in his study and presents why Muslim women tend to surrender against the norms. She challenges the liberal feminist theory and Western philosophy by doing this. She believes resistance is just an aspect of agency to avoid reducing agency down to resistance. Mahmood believes agency could be completely non-resistive (Bilge 2010; Sehlikoglu 2018) and believes breaking the norms is not the only way to freedom from domination. She believes their agency should be seen as the capacity of activity instead of a synonym for resistance against social norms (Mahmood 2005: 153, 157; Mahmood 2001).

Mahmood believes women might easily surrender against normative systems based on humility and submission, but the submission of Egyptian women, which consider obedience to

² Butler, T. (1998). *Gender Trouble, Feminist and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

³ Boddy, 1998, Macleod,1991, Singerman,1995.

⁴ Kandiyoti, 1988, Early, 1993; Haj, 1992; Shalkomy, 2003; Johnson, 2006.

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religious practices in their everyday lives as an important factor and use this submission to cultivate piety in themselves, in the same light as surrender and passivity. They create a potential for expressing their agency by training and gaining intellectual excellence in line with God's will. But the liberal feminist sees this religious acceptance as an obstacle against the freedom of women that results in their subjugation by religion (Mahmood 2005: 31,154,34,174; Mahmood 2001).

While this movement has empowered women to enter Islamic education in institutions affiliated with mosques, their participation is a criticism against the structure. This is a criticism against the limitations of the discourse tradition that supported the adherence and authority of men (Mahmood 2001) while weakening the structure of male domination. Mahmood confidently showed that religious women's conformation of religious concepts contains a certain form of agency previously neglected in feminist theories (Sehlikoglu 2018).

Mahmood looks at this subject from Foucault's point of view. Foucault believes as much as power is all-encompassing, there is resistance against it (Werbner 2018).

In reality, Mahmood created a new window through which researchers could closely examine and understand the agency of Middle Eastern women, outside the confines of the liberal framework. Some researchers have embraced Mahmood's perspective on agency and have demonstrated how women, in patriarchal societies, liberated themselves from the norms of controlling gender discourse through their pious actions (Sadiqi 2018; Muhanna 2015). Mahmood's work was so influential that it led to the conduction of many studies regarding pious⁵ and created the "Piety Turn" term (Sehlikoglu 2018). Some researchers of this era moved beyond Mahmood's argument and piety by paying attention to aspects of agency on religion.

Religious Muslim women of complex societies such as Egypt, Iran, and Turkey face different norm systems and multiple layers of authority such as their families, traditional religion, and society that create contradictory desires in them (Shively 2014). Therefore, people's actions can be seen as their agency in some places and as something other than that in other places. Religion and family can have a certain set of moral demands from women while society might have another set of demands, and the government might impose a third set. Therefore, their fights regarding

⁵ Bayat 2002; Deeb 2006; Hasan 2009; Heryanto 2011; Hitq 2003; Huq 2008; S. Huq and Rashid 2008; Jones 2010; Rozario 2011; B. F. Soares 2004; Tong and Turner 2008; Weintraub 2011; Widodo 2008

gender roles and norms are framed according to (or against) a wide array of expectations (Shively 2014).

Rinaldo believes women's agency can use secular and religious sources alongside each other to promote critical discourses on gender. He suggests pious critical agency (PCA) that is the capacity of critical and public interaction with religious texts. PCA tries to attract the cooperation of women in general and political conversations about the meaning of religious texts by challenging the most common interpretations and resisting the current norms. She, unlike Mahmood, points out this type of agency does not contradict liberal feministic ideals because of its critical aspect. Also, she believes Islam can be a source for women's agency (Rinaldo 2014).

This is while some studies recognized women's religiosity as one of the most important factors for their lack of resistance against traditional identities because they see religion and religious beliefs as the most important factors of tradition. The traditional interpretations of religion emphasize the divine roles of mothers and wives alongside the critical efforts of women for having a successful marriage, gain the satisfaction of their husbands, and being obedient to them (Sarookhani & Rafat Jah 2004).

Methodology

To obtain a direct, firsthand experience and an accurate description of agency in traditional Muslim women's everyday life, a qualitative approach with a focus on thematic analysis was utilized. Data were collected through direct observation and semi-structured interviews with 50 women in Tehran (29 women) and Ankara (21 women). These women were selected from two groups: housewives and employees, taking into account the two variables of the economy and lower education (diploma and lower). All the women were married, with some having no children and others having four children. The age range of participants in Tehran was between 28 and 51 years, while for Turkish participants, it was 28 to 60 years. Data gathering took place over one year in Tehran and more than 7 months in Ankara. Certain common criteria for selecting the statistical population were chosen, eliminating the need to explore individual beliefs. Examples of religious ethics included the consumption of alcoholic drinks, performing abortions, usury, and attending mixed-gender parties. Examples of collective religious ceremonies comprised attending Salah al jama'ah, Jumu'ah, Quran reading sessions, and religious programs at mosques. Additionally, examples of

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obligatory religious behaviors encompassed performing obligatory prayers, fasting, Ghusl, and Zakat al-Fitr.

Most of these women were housewives (21 in Tehran and 11 in Ankara) or had jobs as a cleaner, cooks, nurses, and coaches. Some of them also did work at home and earned a small income from it (8 people in Tehran and 10 people in Ankara).

To select the participants, purposeful sampling and—due to the sensitivity of the issue and the samples—the snowball method is used. The sample size in this study depends on when data saturation was being reached. Interviews in Tehran were conducted mainly at home and indoors, and in Ankara at work and in religious classes. The questions were normalized; They started with everyday activities, nothing too personal or general, and towards a more profound layer; towards themselves, their womanhood, their beliefs, their emotions, and dreams.

Data

Feminine Religion and Agency in Ankara and Tehran

The present study, based on the concept of agency as presented from various perspectives, examines the religion and agency of Muslim women in the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on Iran and Turkey. Therefore, certain sections of the interviews aim to provide a comprehensive representation of this aspect of women's daily lives. It appears that due to the diverse values and inclinations within their religious beliefs, the women participating in this study, who have never had the advantage of higher education and have had limited access to other cultural and economic resources, do not simply adhere to their traditional model of religiosity when encountering new environments. Instead, they consciously engage in rethinking, reviewing, critiquing, and challenging their doctrinal and behavioral foundations. Participating in religious classes, such as Quranic studies, interpretations, and discussions addressing questions and concerns that challenge them in their daily lives, fosters a sense of peace, empathy, and collective identity (Bayat 2010: 129) This engagement also leads to another significant outcome, namely the expansion of religious literacy. This expansion of religious literacy not only counters common interpretations but also allows its primary audience to subtly challenge the exclusive authority of men over religious matters and their status as religious experts (Werbner 2018).

Women have developed other methods of learning and practicing Islamic ideologies such as forming small social groups in the form of home gatherings instead of traditional worship acts such as attending mosques for their prayers, studying interpretation books, and participating in Kandil celebrations⁶. They answer some practical questions about their daily lives alongside some simple activities such as drinking tea and reading verses from Quran, and other traditionally taught religious books. This issue was less common among women in Tehran. In Ankara, they form small groups for discussions about particular topics such as feminism or women's rights in Islam and usually organize seminars and panels for discussions about the role of women in Islam alongside current political matters that affect their social status. Interestingly, they have created active intellectual environments for improving their Islamic lifestyles among their innovative and dedicated activities away from the controversies of large movements. They have gathered many women from different intellectual levels around the same idea to immortalize the feeling of Islamic equality (Saktanber 2002: 217). Women like Ziba in such spaces have the opportunity to expand their religious literacy and to critique and reconsider:

“If we have religious problems, our doubts are solved by themselves. We hear so many lectures here that made us like them. We even find errors in their lectures” (Ziba, 38 years old, Tehran, Small In-House Work).

Now, they present different definitions for concepts such as their inferiority, obedience, domination, having permission, submission, control over their bodies, having children, and many other matters that cast their heavy shadows over them for centuries. They review and recreate these definitions and values based on their knowledge, awareness, and experiences.

Custom and Tradition or Religion

Dependency on a religious society exposes women to ideologies that could significantly affect them. For example, there are rulings, gender norms, and social resources different from customs, habits, and social networks that are all based on religion (Warner & Wittner 1998; Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000; Bartkowski & Read 2003; Becker 1999). During the ages, the patriarchal structure and customs made their way into religion, and the acceptance of this concept as a part of religious belief cannot be ignored. However, the women in this study try to pave the way for the

⁶ The Kandil nights are the Mawlid night, the first Friday of Rajab, the Mi'raj night simultaneous with the Muhammad's first revelation night, 26th of Rajab, and Shab-e-barat, Mid-Sha'ban. These celebrations are named the Kandil celebrations due to the tradition to lighting candles and lamps on the mosque minarets during these days.

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reinterpretation of religion in accordance with the conditions of their daily lives by separating religion from custom.

“I don't think religion limits me. I believe the customs and habits tell women to do this and don't ^do that. Women should go here and don't go there. These are the limitations imposed by the customs of society. We are naturally offended by these limitations. We are calling them social customs and habits. It's not like I would spend less time on the house chores or my children if I left the house. Well, what can I do? My husband doesn't let me go to other places. He allows for this (Quran) class because of its good environment. I don't know why he doesn't allow other places. I don't matter for me. Maybe it's because he is a little jealous. I came to this class and learned a lot of things. I understand the Quran and its interpretation of what God says and wants from us, which is a good thing” (Someira, 43 years old, Ankara, Part-Time Service Worker).

Each of these women sees this subject from their point of view.

“I think a good woman is a woman who doesn't care much about what customs and men want from her and only listens to religious teachings. Because customs want you to be obedient to your husband, religion does not separate men and women. It only talks about good humans” (Gol, 52 years old, Ankara, Housewife).

They express their understanding regarding the necessity and importance of equality between men and women without ever studying the research and talking points of the new female thinkers such as Amina Wadud. These are definitions such as the influence of customs and habits over religious teachings that took new thinkers years to express in different forms. These women express those same depths based on their life experiences and the things they learned from their daily lives in a simple, fluent, and tangible manner fused with action. Khadijeh tries to separate the inequalities between men and women from her religious beliefs. In this path, she neither gives up on inequality nor does she stand against her religious beliefs:

“It's the majority of society, not religion, that gave the inequality viewpoint to women. God created humans equally. I believe men and women were never different. Men and women only have different tasks, and each must complete their tasks” (Khadijeh, 42 years old, Ankara, Housewife).

“I don't think religion has limited us. I think we will have no limitations in life if we know religion, don't relate these customs and habits to religion, and live with the real religion” (Rozieh, 36 years old, Ankara, Housewife).

Dominance

The dominance of men in traditional Islam seems obvious, and even some women have accepted this fact. This traditional Islam has reproduced rights such as dominance, self-voting, and lack of

consulting for many years. For instance, the superiority of men to women in traditional interpretations comes from their perfection of reason and religion, foresight, the performance of religious rites such as Adhan, sermons, I'tikāf, Friday prayers, being selected as Prophets and Imams, a higher share in inheritance, and the acceptance of men's martyrdom (Tabarani 2008, V.8: 231; Jurjani 2009, V.1: 485; Fazil Miqdad 1994, V.2: 212; Sayis 2002: 282). Some see the right of divorce, the number of wives, guardianship over their marriage, and full Diya as other reasons for the superiority of men (Abu l-Futuh Razi 1987, V.5: 349; Zamakhshari 1987, V.1: 505; Amili 1988, V.2: 392; Khazin 1995, V.1: 370). Other interpreters consider physical power, science, writing, horse riding, and shooting alongside the already mentioned adjectives as the factors of men's superiority (Fakhr Razi 1999, V.10: 70; Zamakhshari 1987, V.1: 507; Kiaharasi 2001, V.2: 448). The employment of men in business and commerce in different cities and countries is another one of these features (Maturidi 2005 V.3: 157). Some other interpreters see the reason behind men's superiority as their physical power and more subdued emotions (Fadlallah 1998, V.7: 237), their physical ability and mind (Tabatabaei 1971, V.4: 543), or their physical ability and insight (Abu Zahra Nd, V.3: 1667). However, the women in these interviews presented different interpretations of these matters from traditional Islam. They referred to Islamic concepts by directly referencing the Quran and tradition which can easily shake the hard layers of the patriarchal structure, which has equipped itself with religion.

“We should not superficially read Quran and its interpretations. They could have different meanings that we can't see from the surface. I don't believe the dominance of men in the Quran refers to its common meaning. Because when we read the life story of the Prophet and his wives, we see that he did not act the same” (Maryam, 40 years old, Tehran, Instructor of Exceptional Children).

These conversations with women from Tehran and Ankara had no direct trace of feministic tendencies, but they unconsciously presented their egalitarian demands in the form of Islamic feministic and new religious thinking thoughts. Both groups of women were not after reducing their family functions or creating vulnerability in their family foundations, but they were after archiving their correct and real position away from the current traditional definitions of women and men while maintaining their familial values and presenting a new outlook towards religious principles. Maedeh believes men should accompany women, not prevent them. She did not see this demand as a means of creating instability in families, but she was even able to justify her words using religious sources:

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“They say men must be dominant. I say men must be partners. I think conferring is much better. Even the Quran says 'وامرأهم شورا بينهم'⁷. You should hear each other out and have the right person make the final decision; no, the self-opinioned guy. I don't want to do anything with that type of people” (Maedeh, 37 years old, Tehran, Leader of a Choir).

Getting Permission

Getting permission is another concept these women tangibly experience in their daily lives. This concept emphasizes the limitations of women based on traditional interpretations. It takes their freedom of choice and action while putting even the simplest tasks such as visiting their parameters and family⁸ or even their Mustahab worship (Jassas 1984, V.3:149; Qurtubi 1985, V.5: 169; Sawi 2006, V.1: 291; Marāghi Nd, V.5: 27; Maghniyah 2003, V.1: 105; Tayyib 1991, V.4: 72) or even their Mustahab worships (Tayyib 1991, V. 4: 72) under the supervision of their husbands. Maedeh's experiences in marriage and resistance against gender inequality gave her the courage to replace this “permission getting” with “informing”:

“Sometimes, I ask why men should make decisions for women. For example, I have to stop when he says I'm not satisfied because he doesn't want to go somewhere. In the beginning, I thought I had to ask for permission for whatever I wanted to do, even for drinking water. I thought you must get permission for everything. Then I realized you could just get general permission. For example, I wanted to get permission to go to the Mosque, but he would say no. Then, I felt really bad. If I were a man, I would think that I would just leave for the mosque, say my prayers, and come back. I would have decided what I wanted to do right now. I hate getting permission for everything because I'm not doing something bad, so I don't ask for permission anymore. Now, I just informed him. He is much better now; he gives me much more space. Back then, I had to get permission for everything. I felt inferior. Inferior because I had to obey my husband as my God said, but he wouldn't let me go to mosques, the houses of God. This hurt me” (Maedeh, 37 years old, Tehran, Leader of a Choir).

Atefeh tries to weaken and marginalize this viewpoint by limiting these permissions (and not fully questioning them). “Specifying getting permissions from their husbands” and turning it into an exception instead of a rule gave much more freedom of action to women. According to the new thinkers, these concepts belonged to the early Islam society and were expressed based on the

⁷ And [conduct] their affairs by counsel among themselves (Ash-Shura/38).

⁸ Ali Jassas, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān Jassas*, Editor M. Ghamhavi, (Bayrūt, Lebanon: Dar al-Ahya Al-truth Al-arabi, 1984), V.3 :149; Muhammad ibn Ahmad Qurtubi, *Al-Jami al-Aḥkām al-Qur'an* (Tehran, Iran: Naser Xosro, 1985), V.5 :169; Ahmad ibn Muhammad Sawi, *Haṣīat al-Allamah as-Sawi Ala Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār Al-Kotob Al-Elmia, 2006), V.1: 291; Ahmad Mustafa Marāghi, *Tafsir Al Maraghi* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Fikr, n.d), V.5: 27; Mohammad Maghniyah, *Tafsir al Kashif* (Qom, Iran: Dar al-Kitab al-Islami, 2003), V.1: 105; Abdul-Husain Tayyib, *Al-Tayyib al-Bayan fi Tafsir Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Tehran, Iran: Islamic Publication, 1991), V.4: 72.

cultural and social contexts of the time. Therefore, they have mostly lost their application during these modern times.

“My husband's permission means I want to do something with my husband's money. I ask to see if he is happy with it, even if it's charity. That is different. When my husband agrees with my social activities, I don't have to get his permission for everything. Getting his permission is for special cases, not everything. This subject is from 1400 years ago. This happened during the Prophet's time when women did something they couldn't do without their husbands' permission. Why did they determine Mujtahids for us? Because even religion changes over time. The religious decree is dependent on time” (Atefeh, 36 years old, Tehran, Kindergarten Instructor).

Now, these women try to challenge the traditional definitions of men from the subjugation of women and their power under men using their different understandings of such rules. They want to change these definitions based on their will in line with their goals. Raheleh fully questions the permission getting concept instead of limiting or replacing it because she believes in “The Principle of Mutual Authority”:

“They say when women get married, maybe Islam has this but not in the same way. The social status of that time was different. They say women should be completely in possession of their husband or her will is in his hand when women get married. This is no longer true. When women and men get married, they are two equal people alongside each other. Women should be able to use their authority as much as men are able. This is a mutual thing, not more and not less. But Iranian men don't understand this. They have a problem themselves if they give women too much freedom or cultural poverty if they limit their wives too much. I'm talking about myself; he starts yelling that it's enough you've been out for two whole days if I'm out for two full days as if he had already given me some positive point or reward. But that is not true because I'm not doing anything wrong, or I'm not abusing him. I'm just doing some social work, so his words are wrong. What does it mean that it's enough you've been already out for two days. This is a weak culture” (Raheleh, 32 years old, Tehran, Housewife).

Women of Tehran and Ankara emphasized concepts such as “informing” and “mutual respect to husband” that are being redeveloped in their new manner and completely deny traditional beliefs.

“Me and my husband don't generally like getting permission, and we don't ask each other for permission. We just inform each other, so we both know things. That is just not my personality” (Mobara, 37 years old, Ankara, Cook).

Zelish believes men have created such sensitivities in women. These concepts are the basis for a good life and a correct understanding of “mutual communication” in a harmonic marriage.

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“When your husband does this much work for you, you also put him in a position of respect. I believe some people confuse these facts. This is because of the behavior of some men that makes women sensitive. You inform him because you are his partner and you live with him. He must be informed to help you if needed. But some mix this with the bad meaning of permission” (Zelesh, 28 years old, Ankara, Janitor).

“I try to say it in a manner to inform. But in general, I don't like any manner of getting permission, but I try to express these as in a manner of informing my husband, informing, and sharing. But this is not something interesting that you could like. Informing, we name it that so it wouldn't be difficult” (Yasmil, 35 years old, Ankara, Cook).

Compliance

Obedience, compliance, or receiving the Nashez⁹ label in case of protest are concepts that have seemingly lost their bold place in women's minds even if tradition forces them upon their lives. Most women in Ankara and Tehran have a negative reaction to this. The negative weight of these words was visible in their faces and speech. They would clearly say, “women are not inferior”.

“Who says religious women are passive and obedient. They might compromise to prevent their lives from falling apart if they are not fully obedient. No, that is not true. We have discussions. We talk. Maybe, they think religious women are dumb. People become deep when they follow the sayings of the Quran, the Prophet, and the Imams. Everything has a limit. These things are also said to men. Islam was more on the side of women” (Razieh, 48 years old, Tehran, Housewife).

Raheleh believes even being in service requires balance. “Availability is a mutual subject” while concepts such as “deprivation from the right of freedom and will” were not accepted by many women in Tehran or Ankara. The relationship of wives and husbands is based on “interaction and cooperation,” not “obedience.” They see an important difference between commitment to an authoritarian ruler and selecting him for complete obedience.

“No, look, you should be in service of your husband and family, but this should be a moderate thing. For example, women must do some things around the house, just like how men must be in the service of their families and provide the house expenses. This service is proportionate, so it is wrong for her to spend her entire life on her family. Marriage completes your life, and it's not meant to take over a woman's life fully” (Raheleh, 32 years old, Tehran, Housewife).

Changing the definitions and concepts of everyday life that are unchangeable values in the traditional viewpoint, questioning the traditional interpretations of religion, and integrating newer

⁹ Refers to a woman who disobeys her husband in marriage and marital acts.

interpretations of religious sources considering society's current situation are all signs of women's review of traditional thoughts. They integrate maternal and marital characteristics by maintaining their original thought to change the current borders of these concepts. Atefeh challenges this concept. She believes there is no overlap in traditional religious rulings and the current demands of women. For example, she believes “the Right of Freedom and Will” must be available in every aspect of life:

“It doesn't work in the current world. You can't be in service of your family in the old way. Your work means you're in the service of your family. Your salary shows that” (Sara, 31 years old, Tehran, Office Manager).

Bodies Without Boundaries

Although women's rights activists have condemned any kind of control over the body of women over the years in the name of modernity, secularism, republic, religion, tradition, ethics, etc., the body of women has turned into battlefields of actors that forcibly submit her sometimes in the name of religious, political, or even goodwill over the same years. Currently, Turkish women can be present in public fields as professionals, but they are still expected to remain obedient when it comes to their autonomy and covering their sexual desires. Historically, Turkey's matters related to sexual desires are controlled using traditional, social, and political mechanisms. Virginity tests, virginity repair operations, and honor kills are all examples of this control. Unfortunately, there is no difference between rural and illiterate women, educated women, and even women in high political ranks; all of them are oppressed in the field of sexual desires¹⁰. After a completely democratic and free regime, even men do not want women to stray away from Islamic rules and behavior. These men protested and expressed their doubts against women's claims regarding their oppression and pressures in their personal lives¹¹. It seems the voice of men's doubts is louder than the voice of oppressed women pleading for the truth they live in every day.

“The problem is solved in my head, but it bothers you when it comes to it, and you can't do it. You regard a lot of stuff at the beginning of your marriage but the hormone changes because of pregnancy, and other stuff makes you weak against this stuff. I don't want to be in his complete possession anymore. I did say this to my husband, but my religion and

¹⁰ Dilek Cindoglu and Didem Unal, ‘Gender in Political Sex Scandals in contemporary Turkey: Women’s Agency and the Public Sphere’, *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 36, no. 4, (2015): 1-22. doi: 10.1080/1554477X.2015.1050911.

¹¹ . Ayşe Saktanber, ‘Women and the Iconography of Fear: Islamization in Post-Islamist. Turkey’ Trans M. Rahimi Nadoushan, & R.Alizade, *Journal of Ettelaat Hekmat Va Marefat* 3, (2009): 65-68.

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tradition tell me that I must be submissive to him. My husband also doesn't agree. But I'm not happy with this" (Zohreh, 44 years old, Tehran, Housewife).

The concept of women's submission in sexual matters is absolute in traditional Islam, and women must perform it in any situation or time unless they have a religious excuse¹²; Now Turkish women and their Tehrani women are unanimously tired of this submissiveness. They have found a new definition from the heart of these concepts. These concepts have the new taste of emerging individual identities and new demands of these women. Elaheh wants to enjoy sexual pleasures just like her husband. She believes this is an obvious right for both sides of a relationship. Here, the concept of "womanly pleasure" replaces "submission".

"I got married based on my husband's love. It was 50/50. Sometimes he asks for it, and sometimes I ask. We try to make it a two-way thing. I heard Islam says women's love for their life increases if they ask their husbands. Because if men keep asking, they might think what is she doing. This is a divine feeling. Even if women get more out of it and women have a larger release. The viewpoint of women who see themselves as tools is wrong. I believe women will get more enjoyment when they keep themselves tidy and desire to ask for it because it was her will. Women act as if this is a bad thing, as if they don't like it. But when she enjoys it a few times, she realizes this is my need and his need. It's hard for women, but they get used to it after a few times. That is how we are. Although my living conditions are very difficult" (Elaheh, 29 years old, Tehran, In-House Hairdresser).

They want something more; Atefeh and Reyhan want to own the boundaries of their bodies. They have shown their interest in replacing some old definitions such as submissiveness and possession with the pure feeling of "mutual respect and love".

"The marital relationships are important; men won't stay if you don't pay attention to it. A woman must have a lot of art. Unfortunately, women put on makeup and leave the house but come back home dirty and attack their men. The want of my husband is really important. A good husband is a blessing. Sometimes I'm just not in the mood. Marital relations are not just sexual intercourse. It's to love your husband, even if it's a kiss. This is a mutual subject" (Atefeh, 36 years old, Tehran, Kindergarten Instructor).

"I believe women should be respected in sexual intercourse and also what women do should be out of love, not duty. But we should not ignore men's priorities in satisfying their sexual needs. I want respect out of my husband, and he has realized that he should respect me to satisfy his needs" (Reyhan, 39 years old, Ankara, Janitor).

There were cases where both wife and husband liked makeup, and the woman used it, or they both didn't like it, and the woman didn't use it, but also there were cases where one liked

¹² Maghniyah, Tafsir al Kashif, V.1: 105; Tayyib, *Al-Tayyib al-Bayan*, V.4: 72.

makeup but didn't use it because her husband carelessly stigmatized her. She was rather angry about this, and according to her, this was the stupidest right she wasn't allowed to have. She would wear as much makeup as she liked when he wasn't around. Others didn't like makeup and wore it because their husband asked. She said she was scared of her husband and only tried to satisfy him. It seems the fear of loss can make people do anything. Another woman wanted to perform a nose job, but her husband prohibited her, and another said:

“One of my friends has a religious husband, but he constantly asks his wife to get Botox and Prosthesis. The poor woman has put a prosthesis in her chest multiple times for him; the doctors have told her this is rather dangerous, but she did it because her husband asked for it. I tell her you're stupid. Now, she hasn't listened to her husband for a while. She says I'm tired of this, too hell if he likes that...”

One of the interviewees said she would perform her marital duties even if she was riding a camel and her husband asked for relief for his sexual urges because of what religious sources say. But Marzieh had another viewpoint:

“What should I say. I don't tend to think about my husband's comfort when I'm tired. But on the other hand, they say you should listen to your husband if he asks for it, even on the back of a camel. I don't accept this part. It's really difficult” (Marzieh, 40 years old, Tehran, Housewife).

The Right to Choose

The concept of rights is not tangible for women in the patriarchal structure, so what can you expect when it comes to choosing rights for being or not being. The main problem here was subject related to the authority of women and *... الرَّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ*”¹³ was one of the most controversial verses regarding women among interpreters. There is this assumption in the Islamic legal tradition that God has given the authority and dominance of women to men. People who agree with this fact mainly refer to verse 34 of Nisa. This was the verse used by pre-modern faqihs¹⁴ to establish the concept of Qawwamiyat¹⁵ and define gender roles based on it (Mir-Hosseini 2015). This verse is one of the most expansive legal verses of the Quran that has

¹³ Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other and because they support them from their means (Nisa:34).

¹⁴ Fakhr Razi, 1999, *Mafatih al-Qayb*, Lebanon: Dar Al-Ahya Al-Trath Al-Arabi, Page 70, Volume 10 (he used “الاحذ فوق ايديهن” in reference to Qawwamiyat); Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, 1991, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Lebanon: Dar Al-Ma'rifah, Page 37, Volume 5 (he used “الاحذ على ايديهن” in reference to Qawwam); Muqatil ibn Sulayman, 2002, *Tafsir Muqatil ibn Sulayman*, Lebanon: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi., Page 370: Volume 1; Sulaymān Ibn Ahmad Tabarani, 2008, *Al-Tafsir Al-Kabir: Tafsir Al-Quran Al-Azeem*, Jordan: Dar al-Kitab al-Thaqafi, Page 230, Volume 2.

¹⁵ Men are responsible for the affairs of the family, including their wives.

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been used in matters related to women in Islamic fiqh. You only needed access to pre-modern faqihs, each of them was a character in their own right, so they could tell you women do not have the ruling right in Islamic society (Tabatabaei 1971, V.4: 543)¹⁶. Women's lack of judgment (Suyuti 1984, V.1: 91; Qasimi 1997, V.3: 98; Tabatabaei 1971, V.4: 543), their mandatory compliance in sexual matters (Maghniyah 2003, V.1: 105), not leaving the house without the permission of their husbands even to see their parents or relatives (Jassas 1405, V.3: 149; Qurtubi 1985, V.3: 169; Sawi 2006, V.1: 291; Marāghi Nd, V.5: 27; Maghniyah 2003, V.1: 105), and men's right of divorce whenever they wish (Maghniyah 2003, V.1: 105) all said the same thing. The whole existence of women is summed up in the fact that they must stay at home, be supported by men, and serve men.

But there are some things that have changed. “The transformation of marital and familial relationships and norms” alongside “the creation of new identities” for expressing wants and opinions were visible in all interviews. I believe this was due to the “discovery of new values in views” alongside “the new familiarity of women with their real position” that created resistance on their part in familial and social areas. Reyhan was one of the women who decisively expressed the subject of choice in the context of “individual assessment”:

“Your feelings towards your husband are really important, but it shouldn't be in a way that you do whatever he wants. In many situations, you must act as think, not as he wants” (Reyhan, 39 years old, Ankara, Janitor).

Some women, such as Raheleh, had his right in their stuff and couldn't expand it to larger spaces, but their resistance is defined in terms of “personal decisions”:

“He says the final word in decisions or sometimes just decides by himself. I say he still has the same spirit. But I won't give up on matters relating to me. But when it comes to our shared life, his word is final. This bothered me in the beginning, but after a while, I asked what it had to do with me; it was his money and his life. If I need money, I will get it from him however possible. I force him to spend as much as I want” (Raheleh, 32 years old, Tehran, Housewife).

¹⁶ Of course, Tabatabaei said this regarding the subject of women's rule regarding the Arabs' treatment of women: “Arab's treatment of women was a combination of the behavior of civilized tribes and the behavior of savage tribes. Denying women's independence in law, not allowing them to participate in social activities such as government and war, alongside the problem of marriage and giving the rights of marriage affairs to aristocratic women were taken from Iran and Rome while killing, burying women alive, and torturing them were taken from Barbarians and savages. Therefore, the deprivation of Arab women from the benefits of life was not done to make them worship the head of the house, but they were done to facilitate the dominance of the strong and recruitment of the weak.” (Tabatabaei, 1971, V. 2: 403) But it is worth pondering why the Allama Tabatabaei himself believed in the subject of women's non-rule despite his knowledge regarding the Arab treatment of women.

CONCLUSION

It seems religion and patriarchal traditions work together as important factors in suppressing or limiting women's agency. However, these women respect traditional rules mixed with religion, rules that are widely accepted, reproduced, and reinforced by men. If someone were to ask them about the meaning of this respect, they would undoubtedly respond that they wholeheartedly accept them. They employ delicate and thoughtful methods to redefine or change their paths to pursue whatever activities they have in mind. They do this by emphasizing the apparent aspects of obedience while simultaneously resisting and limiting their state of obedience (Gallagher 2007).

This is a profound and thought-provoking subject because women are not only striving to develop their empowerment opportunities or establish their identities through religion – although it may be surprising to hear, they also have the courage to question the currently available definitions and present new interpretations that differ considerably from traditional views. In reality, a profound change has occurred among Iranian and Turkish women. Religion is not merely a tool for progress in the non-religious aspects of their lives. They have initiated their actions by directly challenging laws rooted in jurisprudence. This challenge has surpassed the stage of resistance and has creatively impacted various aspects of their lives. It has illuminated a more tangible interpretation of Islamic equality and has enabled these women to forge their own identities through a form of resistance that may seem unconventional in our daily lives.

They put forward alternative definitions for concepts such as inferiority, obedience, domination, having permission, submission, control over their bodies, having children, and many other matters. This interpretation of religion empowers them to take control of the material aspects of their lives. They replace “seeking permission” with “informing” and either restrict the scope of permission or oppose it altogether. They prioritize communication, mutual will, interaction, and cooperation over blind obedience. Mutual sexual pleasure, a belief in women's pleasure, and the right to control their own bodies are other concepts they have embraced instead of mere obedience. They emphasize willpower, freedom, mutual respect, love, and the importance of individual choices over domination and advocate for rationalism over blind adherence to traditional rules.

Despite the prevailing social and ideological circumstances in their society, which often pressure them to uphold traditional values, women embrace qualities such as stability, sacrifice, kindness, and compassion in an attempt to maintain their allegiances. (Muhanna 2020). However,

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there is an inner voice within them that asserts their existence goes beyond the confines of traditional roles and values, by which they are often evaluated.

This reasoning was less salient in the words of Tehrani women. They say prayers, fast, and act on God's commands, just like Ankara women. Both understand a good woman as somebody who submits to the orders of God, but the more prominent emphasis of Ankara women on separating customs from religion and paying more attention to interpretations based on rationalism is what separates these women from their Tehrani peers. This is while Tehrani women had accepted the traditional interpretations of religion that matched those customs and habits. For example, Tehrani women saw the things women of Ankara said in their customs regarding surrender and obedience to men in the context of their traditional religion even if they didn't agree with it.

The important fact here is that they don't exactly act and think according to the traditional patterns of religiosity or social, cultural, and religious expectations. They create environments and resources for their freedom of action and fulfill their wishes outside this determined obedient personality frame, and make decisions as to the active agent in the decision-making process after exiting their safe space and experiencing the joys of change. On the one hand, women might not be able to take part in decision-making directly, but they can indirectly affect men's decision-making power. On the other hand, they might have accepted male dominance and believed in it based on the influence of these traditional views and the embedded importance of men's positions in the family, but they could still follow and enact their decisions considering their genius and creativity by mediating their children, emotional relationships, and instilling respect for their husband's role.

In reality, they see no rupture between this religious belief based on new interpretations and the modern world of their lives. religious actions are a part of the activities besides any other daily action or activity of these women who participated in this study. They don't drown themselves in religion as an escape or go into a trance, just like the Zaar cult women or Sudanese women (Boddy 1989; Mahmood 2001) to escape their current situation. Women produce agency in my study based on its definitions and move words beyond pious self-cultivation. They help fade such views that women are entangled in religion and only use it as a tool for gaining their goals without any individuality and creativity. They experience cultural norms in their daily lives and indirectly challenge them without any violence and direct resistance. In the end, feminist anthropologists

emphasize that women's agency and the mobility of their actions are never formed in isolation and never stay still. Agency is always mobile with vague and unpredictable results (Muhanna 2020).

It seems the existence of such interpretations made researchers¹⁷ consider religion as a dynamic cultural and instrumental collection instead of a static top-to-bottom social instruction. This change happened from the bottom to the top. Women accept some traditional religious values while correcting others based on their no longer traditional lives. In reality, women have the chance to negotiate with their religion (Bartkowski & Read 2003).

On the other hand, expansion of religious literacy faces off against common interpretations while allowing its main audience to inconspicuously challenge the exclusive authority of men over religious matters and being religious experts (Werbner 2018). In reality, women strengthened their agency by re-reading religion with the currently fading masculinity of traditional societies.

The viewpoint of women towards the world among these protected frames does not stop them; however, they lead women towards things they deem worthy. "The need for recognition," "having a value in the eyes of others," and "being seen." All of these are difficult tasks because not being seen is a part of the culture of traditional religious women. The women who resist such conditions gradually gain the power to restore their strength and force to build their "self-confidence" and even "individuality" In reality, women strengthened their agency by re-reading religion with the currently fading masculinity of traditional societies.

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New interpretations of religion support these women against the patriarchal structure and allow them to be present as active and independent women with the power of thought and decision-making. Unlike what Mir-Hosseini presents in regards to denying or challenging traditional and patriarchal Islamic beliefs and rules by dedicating such actions to the elite minority of women with

¹⁷ Ammerman 2003; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Bartkowski 1999; Manning 1999; Smith 1998, 2000; Swidler 1986; Williams 1995

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higher education (Mir-Hosseini 2006); These women were able to challenge the traditional Islam and interpretations that provided an environment for their suppression alongside the patriarchal with their low levels of education to open the space for modern thought as the opposite point of traditional thought from inside.

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