Women’s Movements in Iran

By the late twentieth century, two feminist strategies emerged in response to Iran’s patriarchal and repressive political and social institutions: the Muslim Modernist and the Reconstruction movements.¹ Modernist feminists work within the conservative traditions of Islam, using contemporary interpretations of the Islamic texts as the source on modern issues, including women’s rights. Thus, socio-cultural anthropologist Homa Hoodfar, in *Islamic Politics and Women’s Quest for Gender Equality In Iran*,² believes that the Iranian religious state has the capacity to facilitate social democratization and gender equality.³ In her view, Islam is the determinate system of thought, values, and guidelines to govern a contemporary state. In the Reconstructionist movement, feminists challenge the cultural and political order by adopting a confrontational view toward Islamism, advocating normative guidelines for Muslim and non-Muslim women; withstanding an Islamic framework.⁴ Accordingly, feminist writer Fatima Mernissi suggests that, in the *Veil in the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, modernity imposes a Western model that is often incompatible with Islamic culture.⁵

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Therefore, the existing traditional social and political practices of the Muslim world serve as a hindrance to women’s rights. However, the success of the Iranian women’s movement is delayed by the conflicting strategies of these dual feminist movements.

The precursor to these feminist movements began during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian women participated in massive numbers in street demonstrations against the autocratic Shah Mohammed Pahlavi’s regime, 1941-1979. Gendered differences and expectations were not recognizable, rather men and women alike participated in this important event in Iranian history. However, in post-revolution Iran, the newly formed Khomeini government declared Shi’a Islam to be the official religion of the state. Immediately, he repealed many of the women’s rights, save suffrage, given to them under the previous regime. Khomeini’s ascendancy chaperoned in a period of the most egregious of human rights abuses, and state-sponsored executions of dissidents within the country and abroad. Women were heralded as symbols of Western decadence, *gharbzadegi*. The unveiled women decried as a reflection of Western influence on the authentic and indigenous, Iranian culture. Further, the numbers of educated and employed women provoked men from some social groups to regard the accomplishments of Iranian women as the feminization of the Islamic man. According to feminist writer Fatima Mernissi, "the idea of an inferior sex is alien to Islam; it is because of their ‘strengths’ that women had to be subdued and kept under control.” In this climate, women were mandated to wear the *hijab*, a veil, while

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in the public sphere. By antiquated interpretations of Islamic texts, the Iranian government, in 1979, had emplaced the most restrictive gender norms for women in civil society.

Significantly, between 1989 and 2005, women used their suffrage rights to elect more liberal-leaning parliamentary and presidential candidates, resulting in some progressive legal reforms. But, the new reforms have had few appreciable impacts on women’s social status for several reasons. First, modernist male leaders have been unable to sustain long-term political liberalization. President Rafsanjani’s election, in 1989, introduced the Office of Women’s Affairs and reinstated women judges in family courts. In 1997, Khatami won a plurality of the popular vote. His election resulted in some reforms which led to the expansion of many political organizations. However, many of these advancements in women’s rights were, later, limited by the conservative Guardian Council, the supervisory bridge between the religious and the democratic segments of the Iranian government. Alas, Khatami’s influence was further weakened, not only, by traditionalist forces in the non-democratic institutions of the government, but also by the internal divisions between fellow reformists. Modernists became divided on critical issues like the pace of reform, the development of economic and social policies that addressed the increasing inequality in Iran, and the US president citing the Iranian state as a member in the ‘axis of evil’ in 2002. Still, women’s groups remain optimistic that they are able to work within the Iranian governmental framework to advance their social rights and political participation.

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10 Shahra Razavi, in Islamic Politics, Human Rights and Women's Claims for Equality in Iran, 1235.

11 Homa Hoodar and Shadi Sadr, Islamic Politics and Women's Quest for Gender Equality In Iran, 893.
Despite some political setbacks, Iranian women did not recede from the public debate or view. During the Iran-Iraq war, 1980-1988, the male labor force was active in military service, thus women capitalized on the Iranian state’s need to fill vacated public offices. In the 1990s, Iran’s economic policies deregulated and limited state intervention in the market. As a result, income disparity and poverty among the Iranian population grew, thus Muslim women were burdened to earn money in the common market; and care for extended family members in the absence of state support. Moreover, Iranian women produced intellectual and cultural products in many mediums. In 2000, acclaimed Iranian artist Shirin Neshat produced a trio of split-screen films titled *Turbulent, Rapture and Fervor*. These works exposed the stark differences the masculine and the feminine experience in contemporary Islamic culture. In many platforms, feminists remained visible and poised to publicly address the accumulated grievances and the unfulfilled demands of Iranian women.

Although the Iranian regime is patriarchal, its ambiguous and contradictory governmental framework provides an avenue for Islamic women to negotiate within it. The Iranian government is structured so that non-elected and non-accountable religious state institutions managed the democratically elected ones. In 1979, theocratical and secular leaders were competing for access to power and resources, simultaneously modernist women presented their own interpretation of the sacred texts, as a challenge to the conservative interpretations of women’s rights in Islam. According to Hoodfar, this public debate appeared in civil society as moderate

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attempts to save Islam and religion from disrepute. The Iranian women had felt betrayed, despite their support for Khomeini during the Islamic Revolution. In March 1979, a *New York Times* article quoted protesting female university graduates, “We supported the Imam because we believed this was a revolution that belonged to all of us,” adding, “[the] new set of restrictions on our freedom rivals the previous regime’s restrictions on political freedom.” In the public sphere, Islamic women’s groups publicly admonished the ulama (عَلَمَاءٌ), Islamic scholars in the religious hierarchy, for their part in annulling the family laws. Thus, in September 1979, a modified version of the Family Protection Laws with more liberal interpretations of shari’a was adopted, creating new divisions between the conservative and the liberal ulama. Thus, Hoodfar suggests the governmental divisions and conflicts between the religious and secular authorities form the basis of the women’s movement in Iran, and reinforce the Iranian women’s perspective that the solutions to inequality will be found in the East.

With the death of Khomeini in 1989 and modest amendments to women’s political participation under the Rafsanjani government, an evolution occurred in the modernist women’s movement. Shahra Razavi, in *Islamic Politics, Human Rights and Women’s Claims for Equality in Iran*, suggests that new modernist thinking seeks to reform Islamic politics by endorsing the belief that the Islamic texts impart universal values to human rights, democracy, and gender equality. They emphasize a universal interpretation of the Islamic tenets as the “legitimate and

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16 Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr, *Islamic Politics and Women’s Quest for Gender Equality In Iran*, 892.

socially just discourse of human rights.” Islamic modernist scholars understand the Islamic texts, the *Qu’ran*, and the *hadiths*, through the human experience inasmuch as the religious texts are amorphous and evolve to be interpreted by a contemporary Muslim view. Therefore, modern interpretations supplant the previous version of Islam. Modernists believe that, “Interpreted Islam” allows for pluralism and diversity in religious communities, and in Islam itself. Democracy is seen as the most legitimate form of government since it is thought to adopt universal and rational policies. In the modernist understanding, a government beholden to its citizens is perceived as just. Thus, governments with no mechanism for popular accountability, are viewed as unjust. The evolution of the modernist women’s movement constitutes an elastic, ideological transition of Muslim feminism in Iran.

The reconstruction movement exists largely as a contemporary debate among feminist. Turkish sociologist Yakin Ertürk suggests that, “this approach attributes a conservative role to Islam, as an obstacle to progress—whether material or with respect to the status of women.” Influential writer Fatima Mernissi, in *Beyond the Veil*, suggests that the liberation of Muslim women begins with the rejection of the patriarchal system, “starting from the economic structure and ending with its grammar.” In both examples, each emphasizes that the religious texts prevent the radical reorganization of political, economic and social structures of Muslim countries. Further, in *Beyond the Veil*, Mernissi compares female self-determinism in a pre-Islamic Arabia to the present-day Islamic one. She believes that the superior status of women, in

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pre-Islamic Arabia, relates to their sexual control. Islam, therefore, had to suppress female sexuality, since within the conjugal space women impede the direct relationship between Allah and men. Traditionalist Muslims refer to this period in Islamic history as the *jahiliya*, time of barbarism and ignorance.

However, critics of the reconstruction movement note that Mernissi appears to vacillate between Reconstruction and Modernist reform methods when debating the rights of Muslim and non-Muslim women. In a later Mernissi work, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, uses verse 53 of Sura 33, revealed in year five of the Hejira (627 AD), in her discourse on the *hijab* which Muslim governments interpret to mandate the veiling of women. According to her interpretation, the *hijab* is a curtain-not a barrier between a man and women, rather between two men. The *hijab* descends in the bedroom of the newly married couple to protect their privacy and exclude a third person, Anas Ibn Malik, one of the prophet’s companions. The *hijab* verse states, as told by Anas, “The Prophet had wed Zaynab Bint Jahsh. He [Anas] came back to the nuptial chamber. He put one foot in the room and kept the other outside. It was in this position that he let fall the *sitr* [hijab] between himself and me.” Mernissi’s interpretation is that Anas was excluded by the *hijab* as a witness to the intimacy of the couple, and symbolic of a community that had become too invasive. The Islamic

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23 Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Women’s Rights in the Muslim World: reform or reconstruction?*, 1481.


26 Fatima Mernissi, in the *Veil in the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, 86.
community has, therefore, manipulated the sacred texts to fabricate false traditions for women. Further, in this latest work, Mernissi asserts that, “Islam is going through an ‘identity crisis’ and the veil is a symbol of protection.”\(^{27}\) She envisions Muslim women as the symbolic representation of the Islamic community, thus the veil serves another purpose as the figurative barrier to western influence. Mernissi’s latest work inspires hope for those Muslim women who wish to reconcile their faith and belief in the practices of Islam, with their pursuit of social and political equality in Iranian society.

Lastly, as Tunisian sociologist Abelelwahab Bouhdiba suggests, “Islam is fundamentally ‘plastic’, inasmuch as there are various Islams-Tunisia, Iranian, Malay, Afghan, Saudi Arabian and so on.”\(^{28}\) This implies that perhaps Islam has the potentiality to incorporate universal ideals to elevate the social, political and economic status of men and women. At best, the multiplicity of these women’s movements furthers the limits of any single one process, by providing a sense of alternatives, that there are avenues or alternative spaces in which a new way of life may be created, even if those alternatives are not immediately available, or even desirable. At worst, they create divisiveness in the women’s movement because feminists are not mobilized as a unified front. As evidenced by, the yo-yo effect of Iranian political debates and social reforms in the last decades. Optimistically, these dual movements exist and prevent closure, whether advancing or receding; it is movement. But, broader female and male participation, in the political sphere, are parcels to substantive reform measures and the solution to the stagnation of women’s movements in Iran. However, I remain unconvinced that the solution lays in the complete dissolution of the

\(^{27}\) Fatima Mernissi, in the *Veil in the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, 99.

Islamic religious or cultural traditions as many Reconstruction feminists suggest. Similar to Hoodfar, I forward that a unified, conservative movement with an inclusive agenda, within the Islamic framework, might advance the social and political rights of the Iranian people further.
Bibliography


