

# CONTEMPORARY IRAN



*Economy, Society, Politics*

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**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009



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## INTRODUCTION

*Ali Gheissari*

In recent decades Iran has experienced a wide range of changes. These include shifts in the relationship between urban and rural economies, the nationwide growth of the middle class and ensuing social mobility, a higher literacy rate along with the expansion of educational institutions, and new complexities and expectations in gender relations—all within the context of the country's evolving domestic and international politics. This volume examines the extent and the degree of such vicissitudes in contemporary Iran through the prism of different disciplines. Each chapter provides a thorough analysis of its specific and substantive topic, though not in isolation, without neglecting the overarching and interdisciplinary goal of the book to probe the many-sided factors that connect all these radical upheavals and departures together in the still volatile society of contemporary Iran.

Earlier versions of some of the contributions in the present volume were presented at a conference titled “Iran: Domestic Change and Regional Challenges,” held on September 29–30, 2005, at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego. Although the idea of a collection of new research on contemporary Iran was conceived at the time, the conference proceedings form the nucleus of only a part of the present book. Numerous revisions and substantive changes have been made, and some entirely new contributions have been included. The chapters in this volume, as a whole, offer detailed and factual examination of Iran's economy, significant aspects of social change, and the dynamics of its domestic as well as international politics in the period after the 1979 Revolution, with the emphasis on the post-Khomeini period to the present. The issue of social change from different disciplinary perspectives, and the way they complement one another, is the leitmotif that runs through the volume.

These perspectives are studied within a tripartite framework of economy, society, and politics. Part I, on the economy, begins with Djavad Salehi-Isfahani's

essay on oil wealth and economic growth in Iran. It argues that as a people with a relatively recent revolution behind them and still affecting their lives, Iranians are naturally preoccupied with redistribution rather than economic growth. In this chapter Salehi-Isfahani examines the record of past growth, the changes in the distribution of income and the level of poverty, and the role of oil and demographic factors in the long-term growth of the economy. In so doing he tackles a wide range of issues, including the question of the distribution of the revenue from oil and how it affects individual incomes, the growth performance of the economy, and the changing attitudes toward market based reforms. In Salehi-Isfahani's view, if the recent mode of popular politics in Iran continues, the attitude of the Iranian voters will be the initial determining factor as to how far a free market economy will be allowed to expand without the restraints placed upon it by the succeeding governments. He points out that by and large the electorate is disappointed with the public sector and ready to once again allow the market greater autonomy. The pragmatic, pro-market economic policies in the eight years of the right-leaning Rafsanjani administration (1989–1997), followed by equally pragmatic policies of the left-leaning Khatami administration (1997–2005), reflect these popular attitudes—even though in certain key areas of expenditure Iran continues to preserve a command economy since its main source of revenue, oil, is a state monopoly.

In chapter 2, Kaveh Ehsani narrates how the collapse of the monarchy and the subsequent political turmoil precipitated momentous social and geographic changes within the Iranian society. Accordingly, the changes that took place during the first decade after the Revolution set the stage for greater sociological and geographic integration of the country. Ehsani argues that political developments since 1997 (when, with the widespread support of the provincial electorate, a reformist government came to power and gained more support in subsequent local and national elections and in public opinion surveys) offer a clear indication that collective identities and political opinions and trends are no longer forged in Tehran or large cities alone, but also in smaller and more distant provincial localities. In his case study of the small provincial town of Ramhormoz in the southwest province of Khuzestan, an examination of how it was affected by the national events of the first decade after the Revolution, Ehsani analyzes two interconnected processes that have radically altered the social and political landscape of contemporary Iran. The first process can be seen in “the agency of subaltern social actors,” namely, provincial and rural populations, women, young people, war refugees, ethnic minorities, and migrants. Accordingly, these social actors have contributed to social change; at the same time, they have been influenced by the very processes that they had set in motion themselves. The second process is “the transformation of urban space itself, as the arena where much of the social and material contestation to reshape society in the wake of major political changes took place.” Ehsani

further explores the role of the public sector, and of new state institutions and the bureaucracy together with their respective new cadres and clients, as the main “material beneficiaries of some of these urban and provincial transformations” in postrevolution Iran.

The issue of women’s employment is analyzed by Roksana Bahramitash and Hadi Salehi Esfahani in chapter 3. The authors reexamine the evolution of women’s labor force participation (LFP) and employment in Iran in the light of the census data from the latter half of the twentieth century, roughly 1956 to 2006. They show that changes in schooling and economic structure have fundamentally transformed the nature of female LFP and employment in the country. Although women’s overall LFP rate was slow to recover following a sharp drop in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, it has gathered momentum in recent years. More importantly, an increasingly larger proportion of educated women between the ages of 20 and 50 are employed in the private sector in professional positions in urban areas. This is quite different from the expansion of female employment before the Revolution, which was predominantly confined to very young and uneducated women in rural areas who worked mostly as unpaid family workers, for example, weaving carpets or employed in handicraft work. Bahramitash and Salehi Esfahani argue that economic and political factors after the Revolution have been highly instrumental in shaping the new trends. They show that these factors are likely to have played a far more important part than the ideological ones (particularly Islamization), in reducing female LFP and employment during the 1980s, which was essentially due to decline of private sector jobs, particularly low-skill ones in rural handicrafts, closely connected with the disruption of production and trade in the aftermath of Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. In recent years, however, it is unemployment among educated women that has risen sharply because their entry into the labor force has significantly outpaced their ability to find jobs. Nevertheless, as the authors argue, this problem may be temporary since the service sector where female employment is most common, and where the value added per worker is greater than in the rest of the economy, is growing faster than other sectors.

The condition of women is also the focus of Shahla Haeri’s chapter 4 contribution. In this first chapter in part II, which deals with society at large, she analyzes the social context of the relationship between religion, state, and women in Iran since the revolution of 1979. Highlighting women’s growing concern with palpable injustices in their legal and political status and in their social relations, she discusses the apparent paradox that a robust and vibrant women’s movement is in the making in the Islamic republic not despite but *because* of the revival and implementation of serious legal restrictions and discriminatory political practices against their interest. She also analyzes the manner in which the development of structural incongruities and fundamental inconsistencies

in the Islamic state's rhetoric and policies (whether legal/political, religious, or economical), have led to women's awakening to their legal and sociopolitical inequalities. These challenges have in turn motivated women of different backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities to mobilize and to come together to search for common grounds.

Pardis Mahdavi's chapter 5 essay provides an anthropological survey of high-risk behavior among the contemporary Iranian youth. In particular, she focuses on high-risk sexual activity and opiate use. She argues that while preliminary statistics show a rising HIV and drug problem, little is known about the settings and motivations behind such initiations into high-risk practices by urban Iranian youth. Through qualitative and ethnographic research, Mahdavi throws much light on the circumstances, networks, social environments, and motivations surrounding these initiation events. Moreover, she assesses the level of knowledge of high-risk behavior among the youth (e.g., knowledge of transmission of HIV or sterile injection paraphernalia). The findings of this research will be particularly beneficial to the development of educational materials with regard to sex, HIV/AIDS, and the risk reduction campaign in Iran.

The issue of addiction is further analyzed by Amir Arsalan Afkhami in chapter 6. Afkhami argues that after the Revolution the treatment of substance abuse began to be seen by the government outside the previously held medical paradigm. In accordance with the government's new standards of morality, which were drawn along the Islamic religious precepts, and in accordance with new ideological rhetoric, stringent antidrug campaigns were launched; elements of these campaigns included the fining of addicts, imprisonment, and physical punishment and even the death penalty for serious offenses. Afkhami notes that substance abuse specialists from the medical community—no longer benefiting from government support—were marginalized and that treatment centers were closed. Despite these measures (and in tandem with the Iran-Iraq War, political repression, and a deteriorating economy), the drug problem continued to grow, with the number of addicts increasing rapidly. In the early 1990s, as the more pragmatic Rafsanjani came to power, the government began to take a less doctrinaire approach to substance abuse. The chapter explores the history of this shift in policy, beginning with the early days of treatment policy in the Qajar and Pahlavi periods through the early postrevolutionary governments in Iran, and finally to the current crystallization of the harm-reduction treatment model exemplified by community-sponsored methadone and buprenorphine addiction drug treatment programs.

In chapter 7, Farhad Khosrokhavar explains that after a period of relative stagnation immediately after the Revolution, Iran witnessed significant advances in scientific research and activity during 1995–2005. This should be considered as a new trend and departure, Khosrokhavar posits, rather than a mere continuation of the projects left over from the Pahlavi period. Most of those who are

active in producing new scholarly research are young or relatively young and belong to the second or even third postrevolutionary generation; this amounts to the birth of a new scientific community in Iran that has been productive in scientific fields such as chemistry, mathematics, theoretical physics, and genetics. Such achievements are due to a combination of both personal endeavors and the more structural results of the formation of a scientific community. Khosrokhavar argues that many scientists are deeply frustrated, that very few are content with their situation and with the state of research in Iran in general. Nevertheless, in spite of these frustrations, many of those who remain in the country admit to their strong attachment to the country, its culture, and its people. The paradoxical problem is that almost every scientist believes that some headway has been made since the last decade, but many tend to attribute the progress to accident rather than to institution, uncertain as to whether or not it indicates the beginning of a fully fledged scientific community. However, in Khosrokhavar's opinion, the problem is not whether or not a scientific community exists in Iran; rather, the problem is why, in spite of considerable achievements in some fields, Iranian scientists are still skeptical about the Iranian scientific community or deny its existence altogether. According to Khosrokhavar, the general alienation of the Iranian middle class plays a major role in this attitude.

Part III, on politics, begins with chapter 8, Saïd Amir Arjomand's essay on constitutional implications of current political debates in Iran. Arjomand looks closely at Khomeini's constitutional legacy, and emphasizes the importance of the first two decades of the constitutional development in the Islamic republic—namely, the significance of Khomeini's constitutional measures in the last year and a half of his life in terms of his advocacy of the "Absolute Mandate of the Jurist" which was followed by a decree creating of the Council for the Determination [Discernment] of the Interest of the Islamic Order (or the "Expediency Council"). In April 1989, shortly before his death, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the revision of the Constitution of 1979 with regard to a range of specified items, including the issue of leadership and the constitutional recognition of the new Expediency Council. He thus laid the foundation for the system of collective rule by clerical councils that was consolidated after his death, and set the parameters for Iran's constitutional politics to the present. Within this system, however, there has been a marked growth of the personal power of the supreme leader, Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei. To build his personal power, Khamenei has promoted new men from revolutionary armed forces and intelligence, including President Ahmadinejad, at the expense of the clerical elite. In Arjomand's view this has introduced an element of instability into the system of clerical conciliar rule.

In chapter 9, Ali Gheissari and Kaveh-Cyrus Sanandaji argue that the turbulent decade leading up to the 2005 elections—marked by contentious issues over the direction of Iran's domestic and foreign policies—created an opportunity



for the traditional clerical establishment to engage in intense efforts that successfully consolidated conservative power. Indeed, interference in the February 2004 parliamentary elections by the Guardian Council helped to put back in place a conservative parliamentary majority that had been eclipsed since the 2000 elections. By drawing on election data, Gheissari and Sanandaji argue that despite concerns regarding such interference, the public nevertheless took a keen interest in the 2005 presidential campaign. This period generated heated debate about Iran's domestic agenda, particularly the stagnant national economy, and the future direction of its foreign policy. The coherent agenda for economic reform proposed by pragmatic conservatives contrasted sharply with the disorganized reformists and their failure to present concrete solutions to ameliorate public grievances. This led to an increase in political activity in favor of the pragmatic camp, signaling a shift to a new form of conservative politics in Iranian elections that stood in stark contrast to the reform-oriented sentiment that had dominated the Khatami years. Although this development set the tenor of the campaign, the pragmatic conservatives, partly as a result of Guardian Council's vetting method and partly because of certain election irregularities at the eleventh hour, failed to translate voter support into an election victory, as evidenced by the hard-line populist Ahmadinejad's victory over Rafsanjani in the presidential elections of 2005.

Nayereh Tohidi's chapter 10 essay deals with a general overview on the status and rights of ethnic and religious minorities by emphasizing the perils of both secular ultra-nationalist homogenization and religious (Shi'i Islamist) segmentation in contemporary Iran. She argues that an uneven and overcentralized strategy of development has resulted in a wide socioeconomic gap between the center and peripheries. A great part of the grievances of ethnic minorities, who mostly inhabit provincial peripheries of Iran, has its roots in the uneven distribution of power and socioeconomic resources rather than in any interethnic tension. Tohidi further discusses the significance of the recent rise in politicization of ethnic issues, manifested during the presidential elections of 2005 and also in the 2006 clashes in Khuzestan and Kurdistan, from national, regional, and international perspectives. In spite of being treated as a minority, and in spite of the discriminatory attitudes and traditional cultural constraints, ethnic and religious minorities in contemporary Iran have succeeded in improving their social conditions as well as articulating their democratic demands and presenting themselves as a significant political constituency.

Chapter 11, by Anoushiravan Ehteshami, deals with decision making in Iranian foreign policy. Ehteshami argues that both domestic and regional changes have combined to make of Iran an exceptional case study of how an Islamic revolutionary state might set about managing the post-cold war order. Accordingly, in the 1990s it was the new geopolitical realities which came to dominate the agenda of the Islamic republic, bringing Iran closer to its Eurasian hinterland (Central

Asia, China, the European Union, and Russia). Ehteshami also argues that in the new millennium, however, geopolitical complexities have been compounded by the challenge of Salafi Islam, which has emerged as the single most significant source of threat to Iran, as well as to the West's regional interests. Al-Qaeda's fierce attacks on both the Shi'a communities and the West have made tacit, unacknowledged allies of Iran and the West in containing its impact on the status quo in the Middle East. This has been the case, remarkably, despite the ongoing rift between Iran and the United States. The chapter traces Iran's responses to this dynamic environment and analyzes its impact on Iran's elites, outlook, and policies.

Iran's foreign policy is further analyzed by Mohsen Milani in chapter 12. Milani argues that the collapse of Saddam Hussein in Iraq accelerated Iran's transformation from a revolutionary regime to a "regional status quo power" in search of creating "spheres of influence," particularly in southern Iraq. Accordingly, one of Iran's ultimate strategic goals is to become a hub for the transit of goods and services between the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and possibly China. On the other hand, Iran's Iraq policy is directly correlated to Tehran's threat perception regarding the United States. Milani argues that a threatened Iran whose legitimate security needs are ignored would act more erratically in Iraq than would a secure Iran. In Milani's view, the United States and Iran can conveniently build upon their common interests in Iraq to lay the foundation for improving their turbulent relations. Moreover, any future regional security arrangement that excludes Iran will most likely be "expensive, ineffective, and unsustainable." Milani concludes that when the United States, "as the world's hegemonic power," and Iran, "an emerging regional power," are not at peace, the region as a whole will suffer; when they are at peace, the region is more likely to enjoy stability.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume contains contributions from a distinguished group of colleagues who have done innovative empirical and analytical research on various aspects of contemporary Iran, and I thank them all for making this collaborative work such an enjoyable experience. My thanks are also due to Mohsen Ashtiany, Ali Banuazizi, Kaveh Ehsani, Linda Eshaq, Anna Gheissari, Mariam Gheissari, and Ali Rahnema for their advice and assistance during different stages of preparing this book, and to Vali Nasr for his help with organizing the conference at which some of the chapters in this volume were initially presented. I am further grateful to the Warden and Fellows of St. Antony's College, Oxford, where the final work on this volume was completed during a visiting fellowship; and to Cynthia Read, my editor at Oxford University Press, for her keen interest in this project; to anonymous readers for their helpful comments; to Heather Hartman, Meechal Hoffman, and Mariana Templin for professional assistance; and to Carole Berglie for copyediting the text.

### NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Diacritical marks in transliteration of Persian names and terms have been avoided. In spite of this, the transliteration attempts to follow current Persian pronunciation as closely as possible. Persian words already established in English are used in their anglicized form.



## WOMEN, RELIGION, AND POLITICAL AGENCY IN IRAN

*Shahla Haeri*

As one of the 13 women elected to the Sixth Majles, the so-called reformist parliament (2000–2004),<sup>1</sup> Elaheh Koulaee, a professor of political science at Tehran University, publicized her intention to replace her all-enveloping black chador—the “power suit” worn by women in the parliament—with the “Islamic veiling,” meaning a long overcoat, pants, and scarf.<sup>2</sup> There was an immediate hue and cry from some male politicians and journalists and from some women who threatened to harm her should she go through with her decision. Koulaee resisted pressures, insisted on sporting Islamic veiling, and prevailed. “Many of my friends told me that I was walking on a land mine,” she said in an interview. “I told them that I was willing to step on a mine to show that Islam does recognize the right of the individual, and that Islam rises above these kinds of oppressions and superstitions that are forced on people in the name of religion. I wanted to show that clothing doesn’t have to be a uniform. I, as an individual belonging to the generation of the Revolution with [progressive] ideals and beliefs regarding women’s rights in Islam, can never agree to these kinds of oppressions that force people to look alike.”<sup>3</sup>

“Before I was elected to the Sixth Majles,” said the former MP Fatemeh Haghghatjoo, “I strongly believed in a religious government (*hokumat-e dini*), but my experience of four years in the parliament convinced me that religion (*din*) and state (*dowlat*) must be separate. I am not talking about eliminating religion, but when a state uses religion as a means to an end, it alienates people from both the religion and the state.”<sup>4</sup>

On June 12, 2006, a small group of women and their male supporters gathered in a major square in Tehran to demand legal equality between the genders. Perceiving their demand as subversive, the state harshly broke up their peaceful congregation, using female police to “manhandle” the demonstrators. Some 73 people were arrested, 28 of whom were, significantly, the women’s male supporters.<sup>5</sup> After a short detention, the majority of activists were conditionally

released, though their saga has continued. On March 4, 2007, many of the same women were arrested again, this time in anticipation of their planned ceremony for the upcoming International Women's Day on March 8.<sup>6</sup> The activist women, in the meantime, had mobilized and launched a campaign to collect one million signatures in order to force the legislature to change the unequal and restrictive personal laws.<sup>7</sup>

During the summer of 2000, when President Mohammad Khatami was at the height of his popularity, I attended a session in a poor neighborhood in south Tehran regarding women's legal rights, organized by a local feminist activist.<sup>8</sup> It was a hot summer day, and a large number of women—almost all in long black veils (*chador*) and some with children—had come to learn of their rights. The guest speaker was a woman lawyer who restricted her presentation to a formulaic recitation of the rules and regulations regarding marriage, divorce, and the like. Women began to fidget and talk among themselves. Finally a young woman in full black *chador* stood up and said, "Just tell me what my rights are when my husband beats me up, when he prevents me from leaving the house, not even allowing me to go and visit my mother!" The speaker apparently had no satisfactory answer. What was significant and enlightening to me was the degree to which these women, primarily from lower and working classes, wanted to find ways out of their daily conflicts and dilemmas. The fact that they had taken time in the middle of the day to come and listen to a woman lawyer underscores their heightened consciousness and the potential for their mobilization.

Women such as the ones mentioned above, whose political activities and engagement with institutions of power I will describe in the following pages, have done much to "refresh" the sociopolitical climate in Iran, to borrow a metaphor from Sohrab Sepehri.<sup>9</sup> I believe, as do many others, that a robust and vibrant women's movement is emerging in the Islamic Republic of Iran despite renewed implementation of serious legal restrictions and discriminatory political practices.<sup>10</sup> Although the women's movement as a whole may not yet have a publicly acknowledged leadership or a definite political structure, its influence has undeniably been felt by the religious hierarchy that controls the state. President Khatami's landslide election of 1997 is generally deemed a result of the active participation of women and youth.

The broader goal of this chapter is to show the relationships among religion, state, and women in Iran since the Revolution in 1979, thereby highlighting the growing women's awareness of and dissatisfaction with the injustices in their legal and political status and in their social relations. In the geopolitics of the Middle East, Iran provides a unique political case, argue Gheissari and Nasr (2006), in that the state's experimentation with Islamization during the past three decades seems to have, in fact, encouraged development of a dynamic and vibrant, if at times battered, democracy movement. The emerging women's

movement, not quite organized yet, forms a significant part of this larger move toward democracy in Iran.

Iranian women are, of course, far from monolithic, either in their ethnicity and class or in their aspirations, discourses, and objectives. Irrespective of their station in life, however, the family statutes and personal laws apply to them all. Legally, for example, women must secure their husbands' written permission in order to leave the country, regardless of their socioeconomic status and professional achievements. Likewise, they automatically lose custody of their children at the age of seven in the event of a divorce. Paradoxically, while the state has adamantly refused to amend gender laws, it has supported girls' education on a national scale (Howard 2002).<sup>11</sup> The overall female literacy rate is 77 percent, increasing to 97 percent for ages 15–24. Women constitute well over a 65 percent of the student body in the collages.<sup>12</sup> Given that the annual college entrance examination (*konkur*)<sup>13</sup> is administered nationally, without any restrictions on gender or class, the high percentage of women in college is all the more significant. As Ashraf Geramizadegan, a feminist lawyer and editor of the monthly magazine *Hoquq-e Zanan* (Women's Rights) said to me, "women have conquered men's biggest stronghold"—that is, "the universities and other educational places."<sup>14</sup> Conversely, however, women's educational achievements have not translated into comparable employment opportunities. At present there's a high level of dissatisfaction among women regarding their situation in Iran, a dissatisfaction that, not surprisingly, correlates with the high divorce rate, despite laws discriminating against women.<sup>15</sup>

How did Iranian women, who became the target of a punitive theocratic regime and were subjected to serious legal obstacles and socioreligious restrictions, emerge as a significant pressure group that can no longer be silenced or ignored? Understanding this paradox—or a multiplicity of paradoxes—is the subject of my ongoing research project. In this chapter I discuss how the development of structural incongruities and fundamental inconsistencies in the Islamic state's rhetoric and policies, be they legal/political, religious, or economic, have raised women's awareness regarding their legal and sociopolitical inequalities. On the one hand, the state lauds—ad infinitum—the "high status of women in Islam"; on the other hand, it has reinstated a restrictive and literal version of Shari'a law, limited women's professional and career options, and mandated that women wear the veil in public. Such essentially controlling and antidemocratic state policies have sharpened women's sense of injustice, made them aware of their political oppression and their legal subjugations, and exposed the state's patriarchal double standards and hypocrisies. These policies have also motivated women of different backgrounds, classes, and ethnicities to come together and search for common ground. Above all, the state's actions have prompted women to mobilize and take collective action.

The shifting political sands in Iran, it should be noted at the outset, often render analyses and interpretations tentative. Things are highly fluid in the country, changes are haphazard, and leaders are capricious. What one can do and say with impunity one day may be considered improper or even illegal another day, hence deemed inappropriate, dangerous, and even punishable. Political unpredictability, social fluidity, and authoritarian caprice form the larger context of the women's—and men's—activities and events that I describe in the following pages.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

*Feminist method is consciousness raising... the collective reconstruction of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it.*

—Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*

Following the interest generated by my video documentary, *Mrs. President: Women and Political Leadership in Iran*,<sup>16</sup> I have directed my research toward women's political agency and political leadership in Iran, looking at the articulation of religion, politics, and women's political mobilization in the public domain. I have conducted in-depth interviews with several prominent women advisers to former President Khatami, former members of the reformist Sixth Majles (2000–2004), high-ranking women in various ministries and offices, and journalists and academics. I have attended and observed exploratory and political meetings with women from the reformist political group *Jebhe-ye Mosharekat* (Participation Front), given lectures at major universities in Tehran, and attended political rallies and gatherings leading up to the presidential election of 2005.

The women I met at these meetings and gatherings, whether from secular or religious backgrounds, almost unanimously subscribe to the necessity for women's active political participation and mobilization in order to achieve gender equality. Despite some differences in political tactics, these women have few illusions; unless they join forces and find common ground, attempting to secure a foothold in this political institution would be a losing battle and their demands for legal and political equality would be derailed, undermined, or ignored by the religious state.<sup>17</sup> Collaboration and cooperation among Iranian women activists challenge the assumption of neat boundaries between religious and secular, and point to the “imbrications of religious and secular feminisms” in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> My focus here is primarily on the experiences of women activists, politicians, and political leaders in Iran since the Revolution in 1979. Specifically, I concentrate on women representatives in the Sixth Majles, highlighting their experiences and their political discourses. These women are

active in politics while also raising other women's—and men's—consciousness and supporting political mobilization.

My perspective is that of cultural anthropology, and my methodological approach here is that of “fieldwork among equals”—by which I mean researching among women who are close to me in terms of class, profession, level of education, and the like. I developed this ethnographic approach while conducting research in Pakistan from 1991 to 1993. This kind of fieldwork involves “thick description,”<sup>19</sup> multivocality, dialogues, and discussions. What emerges from this collaborative effort is what I have called “shared ethnography,” whereby social analyses and interpretations are prerogatives not only of the anthropologist but also of the women studied.<sup>20</sup>

### THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: A NARRATIVE OF ISLAMIZATION

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is often understood as an Islamic revolution. In framing the broader context of this chapter, I draw a distinction between the revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The popular revolution that overthrew the shah and the Islamic republic that was established subsequently are not necessarily one and the same, though the former quickly metamorphosed into the latter. The charismatic personality of Ayatollah Khomeini galvanized an overwhelming majority of Iranians to break through the frontiers of fear and to participate in those massive demonstrations against the shah. The overwhelming anti-shah popular uprising that led to the revolution of 1979, however, was by and large pluralistic and inclusive of diverse classes, ethnicities, genders, and religions (including Armenians and Jews).<sup>21</sup>

That the Iranian national uprising had religious coloring is not the point—after all, the overwhelming majority of Iranians are Shi'a Muslims. But the Revolution was not initially a religious revivalist movement; the Islamic Republic of Iran that was hoisted onto the state, as the Iran-Iraq War was raging, turned out to be ideological, puritanical, and exclusive. The eight-year war of attrition between Iran and Iraq not only consolidated the state power in the religious hierarchy but also gave it nationalist incentives to eliminate, force underground, or exile all those who demanded—either peacefully or violently—that the state remain true to the pluralist and populist ideals of the Revolution. The democracy movement, or the “Spring of Freedom,” as it was locally called, that had gained momentum toward the last few years of the shah's regime, and had found its voice with the Revolution, was crushed. Though subjugated and broken up, the opposition was not totally vanquished then. Ayatollah Khomeini consolidated his power as supreme leader and the Islamic Republic of Iran was well entrenched. The state's policies to cleanse (*paksazi*) society from all vestiges of Westernization and to create an Islamic moral community in its place were



poised to become reality. Now, twenty-nine years into the Revolution, the state's experimentation with Islamization—its determination to create an exclusively Islamic society and to impose strict Shi'i moral order—has developed multiple paradoxes.

To begin, the seemingly stable marriage of mosque and state is not an indication of a trouble-free union. While the religious hierarchy controls the state, neither the state nor the religious establishment is monolithic and neither speaks with one voice. In fact, since the presidential election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, the long-maintained facade of clerical unity has all but collapsed, exposing some political, religious, and moral fault lines.

With the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, and the election of Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani to the presidency in the same year, the so-called hard-liners or fundamentalists (*osulgarayan*) seemed to be losing their hold on power and their legitimacy was diminished. Rafsanjani started opening up the country to the outside world and granting some civil rights to the public. As Iran gradually emerged from its international isolation and embarked on greater interactions with its neighbors, many Iranian exiles returned home. Newspaper editorials and articles covered the spectrum of political opinions and took critical positions regarding social issues. Television and radio, however, remained firmly under state control. Emerging from years of fear and violence, the deprivation and oppression of a protracted war, and the punitive and puritanical policies of the state, the public found opportunities to demand accountability and ask for restoration of individual autonomy, civil liberties, human rights, women rights, and the like.

Khatami's presidential victory—much to the surprise of the powers that be—realized the popular and democratic demands.<sup>22</sup> “For the first time in Iran's history,” writes Vali Nasr, “democracy was at the center of political debate in Iran. . . . The particular focus on democracy, which was now tied in with the reform movement [associated with Khatami's government], was essential for the continuity and democracy, and for cultural maturity of the democratic movement.”<sup>23</sup> The democracy movement in Iran, according to Nushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, a well-known feminist activist and the editor of the quarterly *Second Sex (Jens-e Dovvom)*,<sup>24</sup> was inclusive, consisting of “women's movement, students' movement, workers' movements, environmental pressure groups, religious reformist movements, ethnic and religious minorities, and [various other] parties and guilds.”<sup>25</sup>

Though enlightened, elegant, and dapper,<sup>26</sup> President Khatami thoroughly disappointed his supporters. Ultimately, he was unable, or as some would say unwilling, to implement the reform programs for which he was overwhelmingly elected. His discourse of democracy, his respect for pluralism, and his internationally acclaimed call for “dialogues among civilizations,”<sup>27</sup> nonetheless gradually became institutionalized in Iran and enjoyed popular support. Indeed, the

demand for democracy, rule of law, individual autonomy, and tolerance became so dominant a discourse that all seven presidential candidates in 2005 couched their campaign promises and slogans in the language of political reform, economic development, and respect for the rule of law, though for some of the contenders those efforts constituted cynical manipulation. Outgoing President Khatami did not miss a chance to draw attention to these dynamics, wishing perhaps to revive his vanishing legacy. He underlined the political currency of democratic discourse as one of the most significant accomplishments of his presidency.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Mostafa Moin,<sup>29</sup> the heir apparent to Khatami and one of the front-runners in 2005, rallied his enthusiastic supporters in a huge demonstration, which I attended, at a large stadium in Tehran and ended his speech declaring dramatically, “The only salvation for Iranians and for the country is democracy, democracy, democracy.”<sup>30</sup> Moin, aware of the crucial role that women played in the election of Khatami, and recognizing their growing demand for inclusion in political process, created a presidential team of three, which included himself, Elaheh Koulaee, and Mohammad-Reza Khatami, a physician and the outgoing president’s younger brother. The latter, like Koulaee, was a member of the Sixth Majles, and both were disqualified from running for a second term by the Guardian Council. In protest, Koulaee and Khatami, along with a majority of the other disqualified MPs, organized an unprecedented sit-in (*tahasson*) in the parliament that lasted 26 days. Eventually, however, they failed either to gain much public support or to force the Guardian Council to change its decision, or to give its rationale for en masse rejection of over 200 sitting MPs.<sup>31</sup>

## JUSTICE AND EQUALITY: THE WOMEN’S NARRATIVE

*Women were kept hidden in the closet (pastu), with the weapon (harbeh), of religion. Religion was used to break religious superstition and taboos for women. Naturally they could not be returned [home] by the time the [Iran-Iraq] war was ended. The windows had been opened up.*

—Zahra Nejadbahram, secretary, Political Committee of Iran  
Women Journalists Association

*Aware of the [feminist] international discourse, Iranian women learned to demand their rights after the revolution [of 1979].*

—Ashraf Gramizadegan, lawyer and cochair, Iran Women  
Journalists Association

*The first step toward effective activism is awareness—coming to recognize oneself and one’s friends/colleagues as capable participants.*

—Martha Ackelsberg

The most visible symbol of the sociomoral order in the newly minted Islamic Republic of Iran was the veiled woman, who was forced to cover herself in a black chador or dark overcoat and scarf—that is, Islamic veiling—in public.<sup>32</sup> Islamic religious law, Shari'a, was upheld as the law of the land, particularly regarding family and personal law, and the Family Protection Law (FPL) of 1967/1975 was hastily dismantled. The irony is that the earlier lawmakers, which included both religious scholars and secular lawyers, had looked into different sources of Shari'a law in order to propose alternative interpretations of family law.<sup>33</sup> Abolition of the FPL and reinstatement of Shi'i family law were aimed at rolling back the modest legal gains that had been made for women before the Revolution. Given the high level of participation by women in the political demonstrations before, during, and after the Revolution, and a general increase in female literacy, many women had become particular about their rights, however.

The politically persuasive calls for women to come into the public domain and protest against the shah—most vociferously articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini—did much to break old religious taboos, open new vistas for women, and raise women's consciousness. Religious events, such as the massacre of Hussein b. Ali (A.D. 680), the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and the Shi'i Third Imam, in Karbala, were given contemporary moral currency; and the leading religious women of Islam, such as Zeinab, who challenged the Umayyad Caliph for murdering her brother Hussein, were upheld as models of ideal womanhood to be emulated: loyal, politically engaged, and fearless to challenge injustice. Here, the unstated objective was to ease conservative male opposition to women's political participation and public appearance.

Huge numbers of women welcomed the chance to move out of the confinement of their homes, to appear in public and demonstrate alongside their male counterparts—with or without their male relatives' presence or permission.<sup>34</sup> Having consolidated power as an Islamic state, however, the government moved quickly to mandate veiling in public, though it was not until 1983 that a universal veiling law was enacted.<sup>35</sup> The irony of the state's blatantly discriminatory ordinance was not lost on many women; they learned painful lessons of patriarchal/state caprice when subsequently threatened with either wearing a scarf (*rousari*) or "getting beaten on the head" (*tousari*), as a prominent slogan made humiliatingly clear to them. Significant numbers of women were driven from their jobs (though the economic necessities of postwar Iran in the late 1980s and early 1990s compelled many women to go back into the job market), and their educational and professional avenues were restricted. Polygyny (a man's marrying several wives simultaneously), restricted under the FPL of 1967, was reinstated and in fact tacitly encouraged. Temporary marriage was lauded as one of the most brilliant laws of Islam, hence preferable to the immoral and "free" male-female relationships of the West.<sup>36</sup> All the while, justification for

and legitimization of such regressive changes were made with regard to three presumably immutable principles, namely the differences between men and women (nature), the divine plan for human society (religion), and Islamic Shari'a law.

By doing so, however, the religious state painted itself into corner with the logic of its own rhetoric. It stated, *ad infinitum*, the dictum that "Islam has raised women's status," yet it humiliated women by denying them a fair chance for self-determination. Wittingly or unwittingly, it seems, the state became instrumental in awakening women's sense of the injustice of their situation and of the unfairness of their second-class citizenship. The realities of women's restrictive lives, and the glaring discrepancy between men's and women's rights and privileges, made the legal and institutional injustice plain to women.

Although forced veiling faced vociferous objections from women, and continues to be resisted by many, in the long run the structure, function, and meaning of the public veiling was shifted from one of controlling and limiting women to legitimizing their public presence and political agency. Having no option, women claimed "ownership" of the veil and used it as a tactical tool for political action and professional performance. If at one point in Iranian history the unveiling of women released their creative energy to express themselves in poetry and novels,<sup>37</sup> then their revealing freed them to obtain education, enter professions, or become participating social actors in public—initially with state blessing. Their active public presence was now perceived to have received "purification" by having obeyed the religiously mandated modesty and veiling.

However, the state's punitive policies to enforce the Islamic veiling in public, to impose a strict religious identity on Iranians, particularly on women, and to segregate the sexes in public and regulate gender relations seemed to have had little success beating women and youth into submission.<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that women who object to the forced veiling can refuse to wear the veil in public—they have no choice there! "Disobedient" women get arrested, taken to the *komitehs* (neighborhood moral police and Revolutionary Guards stations), and given up to 74 lashes.<sup>39</sup> Nor does it mean that women can exercise legal autonomy to secure an equitable and just settlement in the event of divorce,<sup>40</sup> to obtain custody of their children, or to collect an inheritance. Legally, the status of women is restricted and their rights and options are limited.

But what it does mean is that many, particularly urban and educated women, have become aware of the inherent structural and ideological contradictions in the country's political system and its long history of gender injustice. Faced with an unyielding ideological state, many educated Iranian women, much like feminists in other societies and religious traditions, have become active on several fronts. While challenging the patriarchal monopoly on sacred knowledge by gaining expertise in the law and scripture, they have resisted obeying blindly the patriarchal traditions. They are no longer willing to silently bear

their second-class citizenship and accept rules and regulations that are clearly unjust. Additionally, Iranian feminists and activists have become sophisticated in global communications, in the uses of the Internet and cyberspace, to record and communicate their ideas and visions for a gender-balanced social order. Especially, cyberspace provides a forum for contests between women's determination to express their discontent and the state's determination to stifle it. Intolerant of dissent and abusive of women's legal and human rights, the state has consistently attempted to block these activist Web sites. But just as consistently, the women have moved their sites to other locations, sending out quick alerts to inform readers of the change.<sup>41</sup>

Nor are many feminists and activists willing to relinquish the domain of religion and spirituality to men. Millions of women find solace in religion, though not necessarily in the textual, formal, and legal interpretations and practices that have been filtered through patriarchal lenses.<sup>42</sup> Besides, public veiling as presently practiced by many women and the youth in Iran's major urban centers, though perceived as a nuisance by some, particularly in the hot summer months, is not a major impediment to women's development, at least not any longer. In fact, many young Iranian women have used creativity and fashion to turn the requirement into a license to appear in public, particularly in large urban centers. And they do so in huge numbers, working in various professions and pursuing different sociopolitical goals. At the same time, many highly active and politically involved women observe veiling out of conviction and choice.

The major impediment to women's development and achievement of gender equality is not necessarily veiling. They are, as mentioned earlier, structural and legal, as women's agitations for equal legal and political rights reflect. Indeed, many Iranian women have become impatient with the incongruity between the state's rhetoric of respect for women and its action, between the model of ideal womanhood it holds up for them and the reality of denial of their basic rights—such as not being able to keep custody of their children in cases of divorce. They see themselves as educationally surpassing men in colleges and universities, yet limited in the job market and restricted from traveling abroad without their husbands' written permission. They question the state's demand for female modesty while it grants men legal permission for plural marriages. In short, women are growing increasingly frustrated with the unfair treatment they receive in legal, social, political, and economic spheres and with the discriminatory sociocultural practices that permeate their lives. Aware and alert, Iranian women activists and feminists have begun to clamor for the state to match its words with action, to help women realize the high status they are said to have had all along. Mobilizing their resources, Iranian women have pushed successive Iranian governments to face the illogic of its double standard, with more or less success. And this is a deepening dilemma facing the religious state in Iran now.<sup>43</sup>

Inspired by the realization that knowledge is power, or *tavana bovad har keh dana bovad*, as a popular ancient Persian proverb has it, women have

empowered themselves with knowledge of the scripture, the *hadith*, and the Shari'a—the major sources that define their rights and responsibilities in Iran presently. The self-confidence (*khod-bavari*) women have gained in the process has enabled them not only to challenge some archaic traditions that have been imposed on them in the name of religion but also to use religion and progressive religious figures as a way of substantiating demands for gender equality and social change. Zahra Nejadbahram, mentioned at the beginning of this section, like many other women I interviewed believes that the social scene has been transformed so much, and women's expectations raised so drastically, that they can no longer be ignored, kept hidden, or intimidated out of public debate.<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, Ashraf Borujerdi, a former deputy minister of interior in charge of social affairs and an adviser to former President Khatami, told me, "Women have reached a degree of social recognition that they can no longer be ignored. The end of the [Iran-Iraq] war, the expansion of communications, and the rhetoric of the state [Khatami's call for democracy and respect for law and individual rights] helped raise women's consciousness and expectations. Women had many demands, which were publicized through newspapers, nongovernmental organizations, women's associations and institutions, state organizations, and members of parliament, particularly the Sixth Majles."<sup>45</sup>

Taking advantage of the more open political atmosphere during the Rafsanjani and Khatami's governments, women have engaged authorities and institutions of power on all fronts. They founded, funded, and worked collectively or individually in a variety of nongovernmental organizations, building up and strengthening civil society. They have published feminist magazines, newspapers, and periodicals; they write commentaries, exposing the state's discriminatory policies; they take issue with political and judicial decisions such as the stoning for adultery,<sup>46</sup> runaway girls, child abuse, and capital punishment for women who have intentionally or inadvertently murdered violent and abusive men. Women produce and direct films, teach at universities, perform and preach in all-women or mixed gatherings, and compete in car racing, golf tournaments, and polo matches.<sup>47</sup> In short, Iranian women have excelled in every educational, scientific, and artistic field that has been open to them. Collectively, they level present as well as potential challenges to the traditional male privileges and patriarchal power. In the words of Ashraf Borujerdi, "women have become a presence that can no longer be ignored."<sup>48</sup>

## IRANIAN WOMEN MOBILIZE

*When you take action*

*You shed your fears*

—Samad Behrangi

Iranian women's determination to celebrate the International Women's Day in the past few years demonstrates the feminists and activists' relentless struggle for equality and democratic rights.

On June 12, 2005, a group of women in Tehran came together to protest the state's breakup of their earlier gathering on International Women's Day, and to articulate their demand for equality and gender justice by holding a peaceful rally in one of the major parks in the city.<sup>49</sup> Their gathering, however, was abruptly interrupted by the police, who harassed, beat up, and arrested some of the participants.<sup>50</sup> Still, women persisted. With Simin Behbahani, the much loved and renowned elderly poet as their beacon, women began reciting poems and marched on. "This vision I never forget," said Behbahani later:<sup>51</sup>

Women began to move!  
They sang as they walked.  
Demanding their rights,  
They sang as police brutalized them.  
O women,  
You who are the essence of life,  
The days of your slavery are numbered.

The Iranian constitution upholds the right of peaceful assembly (Art. 27), though currently in order to hold a public meeting one needs a permit. Women's requests to hold public meetings, however, were systematically ignored or denied in the months preceding June 2005. Certain that a permit was not forthcoming, the women thus decided to act constitutionally and celebrate International Women's Day in a public arena. This, in the words of one of the organizers, was "itself a protest against the necessity to getting a permit."<sup>52</sup> Although the rally ended in disarray, a few private meetings were held in Tehran and other major cities, during which women joined together to commemorate the day. In solidarity with the world community, International Women's Day is becoming a symbol of feminist activism in Iran.

Celebrating the day was not always hazardous in Iran, however. For the past few years, women, and some of their male supporters, have marked March 8 by organizing events in major cities in Iran. One of the most memorable events took place in March 2003, when Khatami was president. On that day, a group of professional Iranian women, covering the spectrum of religious and political beliefs and principles, organized a gathering of about 150 women and men in the open-air theater of a centrally located park in Tehran. But this was not the only gathering. At least six other organizations and associations of diverse political, religious, and cultural positions also held meetings to mark the day. What is remarkable is that men constituted at least half of the participants in these meetings. They joined in the celebrations, presented papers, and delivered speeches. They were generally supportive of women's demands,

though certainly some of these meetings featured lively discussions and debates between the genders.

Topics at the gatherings ranged from the plight of underage marriage to the then imminent U.S.-led war in Iraq, to an analysis of gender stereotypes in the Iranian media and in textbooks, to gender inequality in Iran, and to how feminism fits with Islam. Indeed, “Feminism and Islam” was the topic of a paper delivered by the former minister for culture and guidance, who spoke on behalf of his wife, Jamileh Kadivar, who was a member of the Sixth Majles and was traveling at the time.<sup>53</sup> The gathering also celebrated women’s roles in and their contributions to history, art, literature, and religion. The group discussed violence against women and the necessity of signing the United Nations’ (UN) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW).<sup>54</sup> The latter topic had sparked intense—and interesting—debates and discussions in the parliament and in the national presses, which I will discuss shortly.

Such gatherings would not have been so remarkable had they not happened against the backdrop of the regime’s ceaseless effort to discourage, even harass, women activists and their supporters. Within the narrative of Islamization, the state’s argument has been, all along, that such gatherings are representative of the culture of imperialism, and hence are subversive and against the public good and the moral order. Above all, the Islamic state has tried hard to co-opt women by appropriating the terminology and language: “protecting women,” “respect for women,” “gender complementarity.” Accordingly, in order to accommodate, and yet control and channel women’s movements and activities, the state commemorates the birthday of Fatemeh, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, as a national woman’s/mother’s day. This day is nationally celebrated in Iran, and is reminiscent of the commercialism of Mother’s Day in the United States, where children and students are encouraged to give gifts to their mothers and teachers. As is the case in the United States, the marketplace performs well in Iran.

## DEBATING THE CONVENTION

One of the major bills that women MPs introduced in the Sixth Majles (2000–2004) regarded signing the aforementioned Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations against Women (again, CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. The following account of the political debate in the parliament is offered here for its unprecedented clarity in presenting the feminist political agency and the challenge feminists MPs leveled against the power structure. It also shows the determination of some women political leaders to encourage a more woman-friendly reinterpretation of Shari’a.<sup>55</sup>

Addressing the speaker of the parliament in December 2002, Fatemeh Khatami (no relation to President Khatami), a women representative from



Mashhad (northeastern Iran), admonishes the Sixth Majles for its slow pace regarding women's welfare. "The Majles has been in session for three years now," she says, "and the only bill before it is that of CEDAW, but even that has not yet been ratified." Referring to the protracted and ongoing debates regarding this bill, she continues, "We were hoping that this bill would be signed quickly. But all of a sudden we realized that, not only did the parliament not pay any attention to our demand, but that it removed its discussion from its agenda. Where can women defend their rights legitimately if not in the parliament?" she declares in exasperation. "Women constitute half of this country's population."<sup>56</sup>

The speaker, Mehdi Karrubi, in turn replies—without a hint of irony—"After the victory of Iranian Revolution, women's situation has much improved. If we had progressed in other areas as much as we have done so regarding women's rights and welfare, the country would have been in a much better situation!"<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, he promises to review the bill once the responsible committee members remove some of its "defects" and "ambiguities," by which he meant adding provisions and clauses that would make CEDAW compatible with the religious law, the Shari'a.

A second woman representative, this time from Tehran, Fatemeh Rakei,<sup>58</sup> a professor of linguistics at Al-Zahra University and a member of the Cultural Caucus and Women's Affairs of the parliament, objects to the parliamentary demand of making CEDAW congruent with the religious law. She argues that this would make the bill too general—too vague. Rakei, sounding impatient with the parliament's apparent unwillingness to ratify the CEDAW, and with the generally slow pace of addressing and redressing the discriminatory laws regarding women, criticizes the legal system and finds it unjust. "Effectively," she says, "these laws are telling women 'get your daily maintenance (*nafaqeh*) and obey'—that is, shut up! Such presumptuousness about us women is no longer possible in our society and must change," she demands.<sup>59</sup>

Aware of the diversity of views among the high-ranking religious scholars regarding women's rights in Iran and in Islam, Rakei astutely points out, "Given the differences of opinion among the jurists and the religious scholars regarding the Shari'a, if one were to add modifying clauses to the Convention, one would practically eliminate the effectiveness of the Convention." That, she finds, would be defeating the whole purpose of the Convention, which is to eliminate all forms of discriminations against women! Rakei goes on to say, "Much has changed in the world, and many changes have taken place in our lives, our thoughts, and our needs, and therefore some of the laws and regulations in the Shari'a must be reviewed and reinterpreted—laws such as divorce, witnessing, and criminal punishment." In other words, all forms of discrimination. To engage the Convention's critics legally, however, she suggests replacing the phrase "according to the Shari'a" with "according to Iranian

laws and regulations,” which in her view is based on Islamic Shari’a anyway, but with this difference the laws are clear and not contested by the political and religious elite. While signing the CEDAW will bring international recognition to Iran, she argues, the basis for legal change is located in “our progressive Shi’a jurisprudence,” which has historically proved to be open to adapting to social changes by exercising the right of independent judgment (*ijtihad*). Rakei expresses hope that before simmering women’s demands boil over, the opponents of the CEDAW bill—and others—realize the seriousness of the situation, change their opposition, and improve women’s rights and situations in Iran.

The issue of Iran’s signing the CEDAW was of concern to other feminists, activists, and journalists also. A woman journalist echoed Rakei’s objection in her talk on International Women’s Day 2003, and posited that if the CEDAW were to be made compatible with the Shari’a, then Iran should not sign the Convention. This, she argued, while buying international prestige for the state, would bring nothing new for women.

Although the Convention was ratified by the Sixth Majles, the Guardian Council rejected it; owing to the changes in the parliament, the Seventh Majles was unwilling to debate the issue again.<sup>60</sup> The power to approve or reject a bill on the basis of its compatibility with the Shari’a rests with the Guardian Council.<sup>61</sup> But the parliamentary debates and the entire text of the CEDAW were printed in several newspapers and magazines, leaving the impression that perhaps Islam and Shi’ism as interpreted by the 12 Guardian Councilmen is in favor of all forms of discrimination against women!

In advancing such reasoning and criticism of the injustices against women, feminists and activists are not alone. They have the support of several grand ayatollahs. Women’s sustained campaign for gender justice seems to have finally fractured the seeming unanimity of religious beliefs and ideas regarding women and gender relations. “The women’s movement in Iran has been so strong,” argues Maryam Khorasani, a feminist activist, “that even the fundamentalists cannot distance themselves from the wave of intellectual demands for legal reform regarding women.”<sup>62</sup> Several religious scholars and ayatollahs, including Ayatollah Yusef Sane’i, a former general prosecutor after the Revolution, and Ayatollah Mohammad-Kazem Musavi-Bojnurdi, a university professor, support women’s rights and gender equality. They do so, however, within a religious framework. Breaking rank with his conservative colleagues, Ayatollah Sane’i, whom I interviewed in Qom during the summer of 2005, finds the discriminatory laws in Iran as “unjust.”<sup>63</sup> In his view, “Islam is a religion of justice and is based on equality and compassion.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the lawmakers must address the prevalent gender injustices in Iran. “Why can’t a woman be a guardian of her own children?<sup>65</sup> To deprive her [of this] is to transgress her rights, to do injustice. And this is against Islam.”<sup>66</sup> Ayatollah Bojnurdi, whom I interviewed

in Tehran in the summer of 2004, points to the significance of putting time and space in historical context when balancing women's rights. He argues, "if at one time in history women were barred from having custody of their children because they were absent from the public domain [i.e., did not hold a job], now that they are everywhere, their rights should be renegotiated."<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Women who entered the Fifth and the Sixth Majles became increasingly vocal regarding gender injustice and inequality.<sup>68</sup> Supported and prompted by networks of professional lawyers, activist, journalists, editors, newspapers, and grassroots organizations, women MPs demanded appropriate social and legal changes in women's status. For many of them their experiences as members of a reformist parliament have been educational and transformative. Subsequently, they have joined forces with other progressive women to raise women's consciousness, individually and collectively, by challenging the state, by voicing complaints and making demands, and by highlighting the social implications of gender oppression for the family and society. They are determined to further "refresh" the political climate in Iran.

The paradoxes of women's advancement in the pseudo-puritanical Islamic Republic of Iran emanate from the convergence of rigidity of the legal structure, the fluidity of the social situation, and the increase in women's literacy. Structurally, the religious state simultaneously hampers and helps gender causes in Iran. The government has provided universal education for women and has honored women's literary achievements with prizes; it has supported women's citizenship rights to elect and be elected to the parliament, and to participate in political institutions, however minimally. Yet an Iranian woman's status remains geared to her father's impulses and her husband's caprice; her rights are institutionally restricted and legally inferior, and her options for a profession are limited. Personal and family laws restrict a woman's right to autonomy and discriminate against her in cases of polygyny, divorce, custody of children, traveling abroad, and political leadership. Taking advantage of the educational opportunities, Iranian women have excelled in all fields and disciplines, and have translated into power the knowledge they have gained since 1979. They have organized and mobilized to agitate for social justice and gender equity systematically and persistently. The specificity of the Iranian women's movement, argues the feminist activist Maryam Khorasani, is its "postmodern . . . centerlessness" (*'adam-e tamarkoz*), in its being "more like the roots of a tree or interconnected networks on the Internet that function horizontally" rather than its being a "hierarchical and pyramidal [patriarchal] classic [political] movement." Accordingly, she rejects the view—predominantly male—that denies the existence of a women's movement in Iran.<sup>69</sup> Likewise,

Elaheh Koulaee believes that “women’s movement in Iran has emerged from the accumulated women’s demands and is continually expanding.”<sup>70</sup> Iranian women and feminists have come a long way since the revolution of 1979, and they have achieved a political presence that can no longer be silenced, ignored, or reversed. Acknowledging the uphill battle and the difficulties ahead, many women I have met are positive about prospects for a growing—and strengthening—women’s movement in Iran, and for a concerted effect by women—and their male supporters—to influence parliamentary politics and state policies.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this chapter was a paper presented at the conference “Iran and Iraq Face the Future,” held at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, September 22–26, 2005; and at Harvard Divinity School in October 2006. I wish to thank Ann Braude, Gannit Ankori, Constance Furey, Rosmary Carbine, and Jia Jinhua for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of the paper when I was a visiting scholar at the Women’s Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School (2005–2006). I am also thankful to Ali Gheissari and the four anonymous readers of this chapter.

1. The Sixth Majles came to be known as reformist because of the considerable number of supporters of the reformist platform of President Mohammad Khatami, who won the presidential election of 1997.

2. The concept of Islamic veiling was popularized by the Islamic Republic of Iran and has come to mean a combination of long and loose overcoat and pants, and a large scarf to cover a woman’s hair. In the past three decades, however, Islamic veiling has gone through several metamorphoses in terms of color (from dark and drab to bright and pastel), form (from long and loose to tight and conspicuous), and size (from wide and all-hair covering to narrow and highlighted-hair revealing). Paradoxically, the state finds its own invention inferior to the traditional long black veil; the latter is ranked as “the best *hijab*,” hence the “power” inherent in this form of veiling and the vociferous objections of some high-ranking religious clerics and conservative MPs to Koulaee’s wish to replace the black chador with the Islamic veiling. For the same reason, but conversely, Masumeh Ebtekar replaced her Islamic veil with the all-enveloping black chador when President Khatami elevated her to an advisory cabinet post.

3. See Shahla Sherkat (2005), p. 4; personal interview, summer 2004, Tehran.

4. Personal interview, summer 2004. Koulaee and Haghighatjoo are both from highly religious backgrounds and grew up wearing the long black veil. Both have a Ph.D. Elaheh Koulaee (b. 1956) is an expert on Iran–Russia relations and the Caucasus. She gained national prominence not only for her scholarly work but also for her vocal support of women’s rights in the Sixth Majles. She has continued to be highly active in politics; in addition to teaching at Tehran University, she is the treasurer of the reformist Participation Front (Jebhe-ye Mosharekat), and in coordination with other feminist activists, she is active in mobilizing women. She views among her achievements in the Sixth Majles the creation of a women’s caucus and its lobbying efforts to have women included in the parliament’s leadership committees—something missing in the Seventh Majles. Reminiscent of the controversial 1984 U.S. vice-presidential debate between George H. W. Bush and Geraldine Ferraro, Koulaee publicly chastised then foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi for his patronizing comments and his attitude toward her in the parliament. Koulaee believes that

ideology rather than rationality governs the decision making in Iran, specifically among the elite. Dictatorship is institutionalized at the state level, she says, and thinks that Iranian society also suffers culturally from the patriarchal dictatorship. She believes that while women's awareness and consciousness have been raised, men's progress on gender issues has been slow, and that while women are considerably more aware of their rights now, the legal structure has remained oppressive (see Sherkat [2005], pp. 3–16). I interviewed her extensively in the summer of 2004 and during her campaign for the presidential candidacy of Mostafa Moin in the summer of 2005. During the short seven days of the presidential campaign in the summer of 2005 she crisscrossed the country to take Moin's message of democracy, civil society, human rights, and rule of law to the public. Fatemeh Haghghatjoo (b. 1969) was one of the youngest 13 women representatives in the Sixth Majles. She wasted no time distinguishing herself as one of the most articulate and outspoken members of the parliament. And she paid for it. Several cases were brought against her, though because of her parliamentary immunity she was not imprisoned. Haghghatjoo completed her Ph.D. in counseling after leaving the parliament. I interviewed her extensively in the summer of 2004 and again in 2005. See also Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2004).

5. This demonstration was organized to commemorate the anniversary of an earlier demonstration in June 2005 that was also harshly suppressed. Because of its timing with the presidential election of 2005, the demonstration had attracted much international attention. Among a large number of personalities who came to Iran to observe was Sean Penn, who had gone to Iran as a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. See SF Gate at [www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/08/22/DDGJUEAF041.DTL](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/08/22/DDGJUEAF041.DTL).

6. See the *Rooz* Web site at [www.roozonline.com/english/archives/2007/03/003305.php](http://www.roozonline.com/english/archives/2007/03/003305.php).

7. This campaign is a creative and brilliant strategy that I have discussed in a forthcoming paper to be published in a book by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology Publications. The campaign demands include:

- A. Banning of polygamy (note: anthropologically speaking, *polygamy* means "plural marriage," whether practiced by men or women; *polygyny* describes a situation in which a man marries several women simultaneously)
- B. Equal right to divorce
- C. Equal child custody rights for mothers and fathers
- D. Equal rights in marriage (women's right to choose her own employment, travel freely, etc.)
- E. Increase in the legal age of children to 18 years of age (currently girls are viewed as adults at 9 years of age and boys at 15 years of age, making them eligible to be tried as adults; Ebrahimi 2004: 40)
- F. Equal value placed on women's testimony in court
- G. Elimination of temporary work contracts, which proportionately and negatively impact women; see further [www.we4change.org/](http://www.we4change.org/) and [www.wechange.info/english/](http://www.wechange.info/english/)

8. The issue of whether to use the term "feminism" and "feminist" was hotly debated by Iranian supporters of women's rights in the 1990s. Currently, both terms have found currency in public discourses and have entered the vocabulary of Iranians. As is the case in the United States, however, the terms carry pejorative connotations. Depending on the context and one's perspective, either positive or negative connotations may apply.

9. Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980), one of the most widely acclaimed poets in present-day Iran, took poetic license to express his sense of disillusionment with politics and politicians in the following haiku:

In place of men of politics  
 Plant trees  
 To refresh the air!

In Persian, *Ja-ye mardan-e siyasat / Beneshanid derakht / Ta hava tazeh shaved.*

10. Much is written on the emerging women's movement in Iran. For Persian material, refer to the ongoing debates in several issues of monthly magazines such as *Zanan* (Women), particularly issues from the late 1990s. Note: as this chapter was going to press, word came that *Zanan's* license was revoked and it became a banned publication. See also *Hoquq-e Zanan* (Women's Rights) and *Jens-e Dovvom* (Second Sex). For English sources, see Hamed Shahidian (2002), Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998), Haideh Moghissi (1996), Nayereh Tohidi (2001), Parvin Paidar (1995), and Hamideh Sedghi (2007). For earlier studies on the women's movement in Iran, see Eliz Sanasarian (1982) and Janet Afary (1996), among others.

11. See the UNICEF Web site at [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran\\_statistics.html#1](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran_statistics.html#1). See also [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran.html).

12. See Golnar Mehran, "Gender and Education in Iran," at the UNESCO Web site, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001468/146809e.pdf>. See also [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran\\_statistics.html#15](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran_statistics.html#15); and World Bank, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=profile&cty=IRN,Iran,%20Islamic%20Rep.&hm=home>.

13. *Konkur* is a Persian loan word derived from the French *concours général*, referring to the highly competitive annual nationwide exams for university entrance.

14. Personal communication, Tehran, January 10, 2006. She is also the executive director of the Iran Women Journalists Association, or AROZA (see the association's Web site at [www.aroza.ir/](http://www.aroza.ir/)). On another occasion (January 15, 2006) I interviewed her in the company of five other members of AROZA.

15. See the *Bad Jens* (Iranian feminist newsletter) Web site at [www.badjens.com/second-edition/divorce.htm](http://www.badjens.com/second-edition/divorce.htm).

16. Distributed by Films for Humanities and Sciences in 2002; see [www.films.com](http://www.films.com).

17. On January 2007 I attended a gathering of Iranian women activists in Tehran. These women had come to discuss the parameters for drawing up a national "Women's Declaration" (*Manshur-e Zanan*). Those in attendance came from different age groups and represented all classes, professions, political and religious backgrounds.

18. See Margo Badran (2002).

19. Borrowing the concept of "thick description" from Gilbert Ryle, Clifford Geertz views thick description as the "object of anthropology" and argues that "Doing ethnography is like trying to read... a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior." See Geertz (1973), p. 10.

20. See Haeri (2002), introduction and p. 406.

21. See Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004). "A memoir of an adolescent Jewish girl's coming-of-age during the Iranian Revolution." See her Web site: [www.royahakakian.com/buzz.html](http://www.royahakakian.com/buzz.html). See also Marjane Satrapi's autobiography, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2004/2005), also about growing up in the Islamic Republic of Iran; and Shirin Ebadi (with Azadeh Moaveni), *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (2007).

22. "The Epic of the Second of Khordad" is how Khatami's supporters have consistently regarded his unexpected 1997 presidential victory. Khatami's epic victory was upstaged only by the "miracle" of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's surprise victory in 2005 identified as such—and upstaged—by the latter's supporters.

23. See Nasr, *Sharq* 706, 2006, for Persian; for English, see Gheissari and Nasr (2004, 2006). The Iranian daily newspaper *Sharq*, banned since late 2006, published a series of articles in which issues of democracy, human rights, peace with Iran's neighbors, and tolerance within the country were addressed in 706, February 25, 2006.

24. The name of this journal obviously is a tribute to Simone de Beauvoir and her classic book, *The Second Sex*. It also expresses the reality of women's second-class citizenship in Iran. *Second Sex* was meant to be a quarterly, but because of its controversial and feminist content, Ahmadi-Khorasani was forced to publish it as a book, which involved her having to go to the Ministry of Guidance to get permission to publish each issue. *Second Sex* ceased publication in 2001, after its 10th issue.

25. See Ahmadi-Khorasani on the following Web site: [www.irwomwn.com/news.php?id=492](http://www.irwomwn.com/news.php?id=492).

26. See N. Haeri (2005).

27. "Dialogue among civilizations," in Khatami's words, is "an ethical perspective, is in fact an invitation to discard what might be termed the power oriented will, in favor of a love oriented one. In this case, the result of dialogue will be empathy and compassion. And the interlocutors will primarily be thinkers, leaders, artists and all benevolent intellectuals who are the true representatives of their respective cultures and civilizations." Khatami's call for dialogue among civilizations was adopted by the UN in November 1998. See the Web site of the Foundation for Dialogue among Civilizations at [www.dialoguefoundation.org/?Lang=en&Page=33-01](http://www.dialoguefoundation.org/?Lang=en&Page=33-01).

28. See reformist or progressive newspapers such as *Sharq* (banned in 2006) and *E'temad*, *E'temad-e Melli*, Iran for June 2005 issues.

29. Moin's candidacy was initially rejected by the Guardian Council, but was subsequently approved when supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, responding to agitation by Moin's supporters, persuaded the council to reconsider its decision.

30. In January 2006, I attended a meeting between Moin and a large number of journalists. He was there to introduce his newly established Democratic Front, to hear the journalists' comments and views, and to explore strategies for launching his new political initiative. He stressed that the guiding principles of his organization were the twin pillars of democracy and human rights. What was readily noticeable at this meeting was the presence of many young women journalists—well over one-third of the group—who did not hesitate to ask pertinent questions and to challenge Moin's apparently unwarranted optimistic political observations and assertions.

31. See Alinejad (2004), pp. 25–31.

32. The mandatory act of public veiling imposed by the Islamic state, and its punitive strategies to implement the policy, seems to be a delayed retaliatory response to Reza Shah Pahlavi's (r. 1925–1941) mandatory Unveiling Act of 1936, also implemented forcefully and punitively.

33. See Hinchcliff (1968), pp. 516–517; Esposito (1982).

34. Mahnaz Afkhami, the secretary general of the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI or *Sazman-e Zanan-e Iran*; 1970–1979) and minister of women's affairs (1976–1978) under the shah, also credits the WOI for the huge presence of women in public and for their active participation in demonstrations. In her view, the WOI had created and maintained an active women's network across the country, organizing meetings for women and raising their consciousness regarding their rights (as per personal interview). See also Afkhami (1994), pp. 16–20.

35. See Sedghi (2007).

36. See Haeri (1989).



37. See Milani (1992).

38. Of Iran's nearly 70 million population, over one-third is between the ages of 14 and 24; see Statistical Center of Iran (Markaz-e Amar-e Iran), [www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci/sci.negahbeiran/sci.Population](http://www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci/sci.negahbeiran/sci.Population), accessed August 12, 2008.

39. But then the boundaries of proper Islamic veiling are continuously contested and subverted by young women and men, particularly in large cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. Young men and women systematically and ceaselessly use their bodies as a site of resistance and they flaunt their individuality by stylishly improvising on the mandatory Islamic veiling.

40. Divorce, of course, may take place by mutual consent; some wealthier women may hire a lawyer to negotiate a more agreeable settlement. Still, if the man refuses to divorce—especially if the divorce is initiated by the wife—the outcome can be unpredictable, prolonged, and costly.

41. See, for example, the following Web sites, accessed at different times during 2007 and 2008: Madreseh-ye Feministi at <http://feministschool.org>; Women's Field at <http://meydaan.org/>; Change for Equality at [www.change4equality.net/](http://www.change4equality.net/); [www.we4change/English/](http://www.we4change/English/); and Zanestan at <http://zanestan.blogspot.com/>.

42. See Leila Ahmed's (1999) cogent discussion regarding the distinctions and differences between formal/patriarchal Islam and informal/women Islam.

43. One way of dealing with this dilemma is to support women and associations that reflect the state's agenda and, conversely, to prevent women—and men—reformists or independents from assuming a position of public power and authority. Caught off guard by the landslide victory of the reformist MPs elected to the Sixth Majles, the Guardian Council disqualified en masse a majority of moderate and reformist men and women from standing for parliamentary election again in 2004. The present crop of women MPs in the Seventh Majles have rejected many, if not all, of the progressive changes that were initiated or implemented by the reformist women MPs in the Sixth and Fifth Majles.

44. Zahra Nejadbahram, personal interview, January 3, 2006, Tehran.

45. Ashraf Borujerdi, personal interview, January 4, 2006, Tehran.

46. On the campaign against stoning, see Sadr (2002), pp. 11–13.

47. See the cover and articles in *Zanan* 127, pp. 2–6, for women and polo; *Zanan* 116, pp. 9–13, for women and car racing; and *Zanan* 110, pp. 24–25, for women and golf.

48. Personal interview, January 4, 2006, Tehran.

49. The events of June, 12, 2006, and March 4, 2007, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter have their origins in these earlier women's demonstrations and shows of discontent.

50. Some of the battered and arrested women have filed lawsuits against the police for maltreatment. Their cases are still pending; the police have denied physical abuse.

51. Simin Behbahani, describing her participation in and observation of the women's interrupted demonstration on June 12, 2005, in Tehran. For translations of her poetry, see *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poem by Simin Behbahani* (1999).

52. See the Rooz Web site at <http://roozonline.com/01newsstory/014543.shtml>.

53. As of 2006, Jamileh Kadivar was the chair of the Iran Women Journalists Association (AROZA); see [www.aroza.ir/](http://www.aroza.ir/).

54. CEDAW, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is described by the CEDAW Web site "as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination." The Convention defines discrimination against women as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women,



irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field"; see also [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/).

55. Women MPs in the Sixth Majles drew on a vast network of journalists, lawyers, activists, and others to prepare their speeches and make their legal and political arguments. Ashraf Geramizadegan, mentioned earlier, was one of the most influential of these sources.

56. See *Zanan* 97, March 2002, p. 20.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Fatemeh Rakei, also a poet, comes from a middle-class background. Although not everyone in her family is veiled, as she told me in an interview in summer of 2006, she has voluntarily decided to observe veiling. For an interview with her regarding Iranian women, see the Iran Web site at [www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=18605](http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=18605).

59. For some background information, see Ardalan (2002); available at the *Bad Jens* Web site at [www.badjens.com/fifthedition/Joining.htm](http://www.badjens.com/fifthedition/Joining.htm).

60. See *Zanan* 97, March 2002, p. 20. Unlike MPs such as Rakei and Koulaee, the women representatives in the Seventh Majles give full allegiance to their hard-liner party bosses and uphold the party platform. The latter have attempted to turn back the clock and reverse the changes women achieved in the Sixth Majles, including the CEDAW. Fatemeh Alia's response is representative. She was asked to explain some of the shortcomings of CEDAW. She answered, "Iran is concerned about various issues of the mentioned convention. CEDAW undermines the traditional family structure, which is much respected in our society. The preamble states, 'A change in the traditional role of men as well as the role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality between men and women.' This requires states to 'Modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices based on stereotyped roles for men and women.' This Convention denies any distinctions between men and women. It defines discrimination in its own words as 'any distinction on the basis of sex,' in 'any field.' This is to say, it ignores differences between the roles, rights, and obligations of men and women in the natural world. The convention also states that governments should 'ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning.' This sort of rhetoric also includes open access to abortion services. Abortion, of course, is only one of the contradictions between Islamic law and the Convention. Countries that have ratified CEDAW will also be obliged to welcome sexual relations out of wedlock, which Islam prohibits because of the harm it does to the society. The Islamic tradition of *hijab* frees women from being perceived primarily as sexual instruments and helps cleanse the society of promiscuity. A healthy and vigorous society is considered essential in Islam for individuals to be able to nurture and develop their abilities. Societies which promote women as sexual objects also have a horrendous rate of violence toward women. The wisdom behind this dress code is to minimize sexual entertainment and degradation in society as much as possible for both men and women.... Islam allows polygamy for men whereas there is no such law for women. Certain circumstances require such remedial laws to be introduced in the society. Due to conditions like war, the total number of women sometimes exceeds the number of men. At such times, the society must resolve the dilemma of caring for women who have the right of marriage, emotional support and welfare. In these circumstances polygamy is the only just solution." See the Iran Defence Web site at [www.irandefence.net/archive/index.php/t-25392.html](http://www.irandefence.net/archive/index.php/t-25392.html). Fereshteh Sasani, an adviser to the minister of the interior, similarly argues that the CEDAW serves men's need and supports them rather than women; see the AROZA Web site at [www.arozai.ir/site/article77.html](http://www.arozai.ir/site/article77.html).

61. The Guardian Council rejected most of the 33 bills that women introduced in the Sixth Majles, all on the grounds that they were incompatible with the Shari'a law. See [www.amnestyusa.org/news/document.do?id=ENGMDE130242006](http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/document.do?id=ENGMDE130242006).

62. See the Focus on Iranian Women Web site at [www.irwomen.com/news.php?id=253](http://www.irwomen.com/news.php?id=253).

63. I interviewed Ayatollah Sane'i in Qom regarding temporary marriage. He is one of the few ayatollahs who are against the legality of temporary marriage. For more detailed discussions of the differences between his interpretations of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions (*hadith*) and the Shari'a, as currently applied by the Islamic Republic of Iran, see Karimi-Majd (2003) and Mir-Hosseini (1999).

64. See Karimi-Majd (2003), pp. 2–7.

65. Until recently, according to Shari'a law, girls up until the age of seven and boys until two would stay in the custody of their mother in cases of divorce, at which time their custody would automatically pass to their fathers. The Sixth Majles succeeded in increasing the age for boys to seven; see Ebrahimi (2004), pp. 40–42.

66. Karimi-Majd (2003); *ibid*.

67. Personal communication, summer 2004, Tehran.

68. For a brief report on the activities of women in the Fifth Majles, see Ebrahimi (1999), pp. 3–13; and Tariqi (1999), pp. 14–16.

69. See the Focus on Iranian Women Web site at [www.irwomwn.com/news.php?id=253](http://www.irwomwn.com/news.php?id=253). Shadi Sadr (2006), a young and courageous lawyer/activist, borrows the metaphor of *zorouf-e mortabet* (interconnected containers) from liquid physics to describe the form and substance of women's movements in Iran.

70. See Sherkat (2005), p. 15.

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