

Introduction

“The women question”, i.e. gender inequality, is worldwide acknowledged as a complex global issue. All over the world women are daily confronted with unequal treatment in both public and private spheres. Compared to Western countries however, gender inequality in Muslim countries is generally more subject to discussion. Despite the effort of national governments and many international organizations it has been proven complicated to break through the traditional gender related role patterns.

Like most Muslim countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a signatory of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which authorizes non-discrimination based on gender and the Iranian Constitution includes the protection of women. Yet, in reality these regulations often seem to be violated. Moreover, from a Western point of view it is generally assumed that conditions for women have worsened after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, both in the private and in the public sphere, most important as a result of Muslim ideology.

Before Iran changed to the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who had ruled the country for many years, attempted to modernize and secularize the state by means of the “White Revolution”, and focused his internal policies on women’s rights and compulsory education. He furthermore emphasized European values as a development of modernity. Under his regime, i.e. the Pahlavi regime, many women adopted Western fashions as a result. Prior to this, his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, prohibited the veil for women in 1936, which remained unchanged during the regime of his son. With the overthrow of the Shah and the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, Iran changed from a monarchy to an Islamic regime based on an Islamic Constitution and Islamic laws, in which the role of women became restricted to the private sphere within a patriarchal society. As a result, a Western stereotype of Iranian women being “veiled helpless creatures” and therefore victims of Islam was created. In this perspective more specific, Islam has been having negative consequences on the development of Iranian women and the policies of the Islamic Republic have strengthened inequalities. This stereotypical view has dominated public opinion since 1979 in both Western societies in general, and among scholars.

Meanwhile, a remarkable development related to Iranian women has been taking place in the years after the revolution, i.e. a growth of women’s labor force and political participation and increasing access to education. **This study will attempt to show that the role, participation in the public sphere, and feminist consciousness of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran are –to a great extent– determined by historic, social and economic factors and changes, in contrast to Islamic laws and religious ideologies.** It is therefore possible for Iranian women to be active participants and female activists in a patriarchal society, even under a theocratic Islamic regime. Therefore this study will question the generalization that Muslim ideology automatically generates a negative effect on women based on the facts in Iran. In this context it can therefore be argued that paradoxically, the Islamization of Iran has been having a positive influence on the development of the status and the position of Iranian women in the public sphere.

In order to develop this hypothesis two questions will be answered that correspond to the two parts of this study. First of all, “in what ways does Islamic law construct and limit women’s role, participation in the public sphere and feminist consciousness in the Islamic Republic of Iran?” Secondly, “in what ways do historic, social, and economic factors and changes contribute to women’s empowerment, i.e. their role, participation in the public sphere, and feminist consciousness in the Islamic Republic of Iran?”

Part I “The Islamic Revolution in Iran: legal effects on the position of women” is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter the role of women during the Iranian Revolution and the significance and outcomes of this active participation will be discussed. In the second chapter Islamic law and the effects on the position of women will be assessed. In the third chapter Ayatollah Khomeini’s perception on women will be defined, Islamic laws will critically be assessed by evaluating opportunities for women in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and it will moreover be explained that women were confronted with a dual role in society.

Part II “Women’s empowerment: historic, social, and economic factors” is divided into five chapters. In chapter four Iranian women and access to education will be evaluated. In chapter five the role of Iranian women in the workforce will be assessed. In chapter six the participation of Iranian women in politics will be approached. In chapter seven the development of Iranian feminism will be analyzed. In chapter eight the changes concerning the public participation of Iranian women under Khatami’s presidency will be explained. The focus of this study will be on Muslim women in the public sphere in the years between the Iranian Revolution (1978) and 2004. In addition, a short overview of Iran’s current situation (2010) will be given.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that although most literature used in this study is written by Iranian scholars, it is written from a Western point of view, and unfortunately not based on primary research. Therefore, it must be taken into account that other sources may differ from the perception of this study, based on other points of view. It is not claimed moreover, to provide here a comprehensive picture of women in Iran. It is recognized that it is impossible to make generalizations about it, especially given the complexity related to social, religious and geographic differences. The goal of this study is instead, to explore the emergence of a courageous part of the Iranian population, and to question the absolute influence of an Islamic theocratic regime by assessing the changes concerning women in post-revolutionary Iran compared to their position under the regime of the Shah.

Part I

The Islamic Revolution in Iran: Legal Effects on the Position of Women

1. Women and the Iranian Revolution 1978-1979

In this chapter the role of women during the Iranian Islamic Revolution will be discussed. For the first time in Iranian history, women publically participated in excessive numbers. This contribution had significant consequences; most important being the awareness women obtained as a result of the ability to contribute next to men in the public sphere. It will be explained moreover, why women fought against the regime of the Shah that supposedly had given them more freedom and rights.

1.1. The participation of women during the Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution (1978-1979), also known as the “Islamic Revolution”, can be seen as a turning point in the history of Iranian society, and particularly of Iranian women. Before the revolution, only a small percentage of merely educated upper-middle class women had been participating in public movements, such as the Tobacco Protest (1891-1892) which signified women’s first organized political opposition in Iranian history. This was the first of a serie of efforts that ended in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)¹. During this movement, women organized street disorders; participated in fights; joined underground activities against foreign powers; boycotted foreign imports; participated in the destruction of a Russian bank; and raised funds for the foundation of the National Bank². As a result of this struggle, some women realized their ability to organize political activities. Some decades after, women were involved in the Movement for the Nationalization of Oil (1951-1953).

The Iranian Revolution however, signified the first time that hundreds of thousands of women of all ages, socio-economic classes and statuses, religious and secular, modern and traditional, participated in the mass demonstrations against the “female friendly” regime of Muhammad Reza Shah –also known as the Pahlavi regime– and supported Ayatollah³ Ruhollah Khomeini in his struggle to Islamize Iran. The motto “Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic” became a trademark of the revolution and the issue of women’s liberation became a central aspect. Mass demonstrations used slogans against the understanding of women as “sex objects” and demanded respect and social value for women⁴.

Women participated in various activities during the demonstrations. They joined men in strikes and organized protest groups; led first-aid centers; they participated in boycotts at work; took part in guerilla attacks; donated blood; and made passionate speeches⁵. In other words, women participated in all major public and private organizations. “These revolutionary women did not view themselves as separate from their male counterparts, but as compatriots joined in the struggle to overthrow the regime and set up an ideal state”⁶. To put it differently, gender segregation did not play a significant role.

¹ Mansoureh Etehadieh, “The Origins and Development of the Women’s Movement in Iran, 1906-41,” in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 86.

² Ali Akbar Mahdi, “The Iranian Women’s Movement: A Century long Struggle,” *The Muslim World*, vol. 94 (2004): 428.

³ High-Ranking Cleric.

⁴ Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 217.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁶ Guity Nashat, “Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008): 174.