# Iranian Women Political Tendencies

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*Abstract*

There are different pictures and voices of Iranian women, diverse in their nature. Islamic fundamentalist women have combated despotism and imperialism and paid a high price for establishing the Islamic Republic in Iran. They will never remain indifferent against the attackers to their spiritualism, religious beliefs, national integrity and personal identity particularly with respect to their position of motherhood. Islamic reformist women striving to develop civil rights for women, to promote democracy for all, to advance fundamental freedoms and gender equity and equality and to strengthen the "Republic" column of the Islamic Republic, are also of a great picture and voice in recent decade. Regardless of those religious minority women, there are some secular women who actively favor the separation between the religion and the state in Iran. Although the latter is marginalized according to the Constitution and other Islamic laws and denied political participation and candidacy for the parliament and the city councils, they are influential in shaping the women's prospect regarding their private lives, clothing and other natural human rights.

Nevertheless, all these three are common in undergoing one patriarchal system cast in both public and private life with no difference to whether their private or public institutions are religious or secular. This is an interconnection between the two ends of the gender lever in Iran. Both men and women need and love to have and keep this interconnection firmly. Therefore women's issue in Iran seems to be a historical, cultural and natural issue rather than religious or something resulted by the 1979 Islamic revolution.

## *Introduction*

Feminism has always been a difficult term to define as it was amorphous and ever changing and because there are so many schools of thought with widely varying views. "As a preliminary definition", to Barbara Arneil, Feminism might be

> the recognition that, virtually across time and place, men and women are unequal in the power they have, either in society or over their own lives, and the corollary belief that men and women should be equal; the belief that knowledge has been written about, by and for men and the corollary belief that all schools of knowledge must be re-examined and understood to reveal the extent to which they ignore or distort gender.[1]

Feminism, to Elisabeth Prugl and Mary K. Meyer, is an "organized fight" of women in many countries against "male supremacy and to advance interests that arise from their unique life experiences." To them "with the rise of multilateral institutions in the twentieth century, there emerged in addition a form of feminism with an international organizations and the normative practices of global governance" which has resulted to "a global women's movement characterized by diverse organizational structures, political strategies, and … one common goal: the empowerment and advancement of the world's women."[2]

Feminists in the West generally condemn what they call "the religious misogynism in theocratic states." Since 1979 Islamic revolution, possibly because of its anti-American policy, the women of Iran have been at the center of Western debates about Muslim women. For political reasons, Western media and politicians characterize Iranian women, just like Muslim women in general, as passive creatures of Islam and capitalize on the Islamic government's "forced gender apartheid" — compulsory veiling, sexual segregation in public spaces, barring women from access to the legal profession, etc.

To support Iranian women, some feminists and activists in women's movements see it in a spirit of solidarity and commitment to the liberation of all women. They favor increasing internationalization of feminism that may provide new prospects for women's solidarity throughout the world. Whereas others vote for some theoretical perspectives such as cultural relativism, identity politics, and postmodernism that emphasizes the uniqueness, particularism, and localism of individuals, cultures, nations, and identities, best identified in terms of their "differences" from each other. Ideas of sameness, solidarity and internationalism are, consequently, rejected as "grand narratives," "universalization," "totalization," or "essentialization." Politically, these theories advocate either defeatism and passivism or the fragmentation of women's movements into local or "micro" initiatives.[3] Chris Corrin, for instance, emphasizes on "the plurality of feminisms" and recognizes that "there can be no unitary feminism but rather feminist perspectives which aim to unify ways of thinking and actions towards social change."[4] On this way through, summing up

the experience of fifteen years of women's life under the Islamic Iran, Nayereh Tohidi posits the formation of an "Islamic model of womanhood." She suggests that:

> 'the model of Islamic woman' in Iran has taken on new characteristics which are distinct from, and in some respects contradictory to, the image of a domesticated woman promoted by the Islamic clerics in the initial stages of the Revolution. Among (Elite and non-Elite) Muslim women active in the socio-political arena, a new consciousness or a reformist trend, which some have called 'Islamic feminism' is quietly evolving. This trend opens up new prospects for Iranian women in general and new challenges for secular feminists in particular. It may change the dimensions, conception, and definition of women's identity and the woman question for the younger generation of Iranian women and men.[5]

Muslim scholars of Middle Eastern origin often show them as victims of imperialism, cultural invasion, political despotism, patriarchy and class oppression. These studies may often skew by ideological, political, and nationalistic biases too. Their gender-blind methodologies and inaccurate assumptions of the two result either in ignoring or underestimating women's contributions to political and economic processes. Even some gender exploration of Islamism in Iran, have come to the theory of "authoritarianism":

> By pointing to sites of changes and resistance and by showing that the decision to join these movements stems from a desire to both "escape from tradition" and "escape from freedom." Women who join right-wing Islamist movements gain a number of rights that the traditional patriarchal society does not offer them. These privileges, however, come at a heavy cost to others, especially secular advocates of women's rights who have suffered immensely under the Islamic theocracy of Iran."[6]

This sort of proposition based on the view of women's "experience" or "identity" in Islamic Iran is a relativist thinking which shows respect for diverse cultures and traditions and not only rejects the "plurality" of Iranian women but institutes a great divide among women of the world according to their religion, ethnicity, nationality, culture, geographic location, and other particularisms as well.

Identifying the discourses of fundamentalism, reformism and secularism as broad political tendencies in Islamic Iran, I examine the position of women in the context of these discourses and show how each discourse emerged, evolved, and affected the position of women in the political, economic, and social spheres. In this way I try to develop a critical, historical, and interdisciplinary approach that challenges the prevailing misconceptions and generalizations about gender relations found in current feminist studies on Iran.

Refusing to generalize the idea of this essay to all Islamic and non Islamic societies both inside and outside Iran, I assume historical specificity which means to understand the Iranian Muslim feminism and its political tendencies. My point is that in order to understand what women share in common, we need to adopt a broad historical, political, and anthropological lens through which the

diversity of women's experiences arising from differences of age, class, wealth, opportunity, ability, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and so on can be analyzed.

Adopting a somewhat different perspective, I am not looking at rank-and-file women who, willingly or not, acquiesced to the Islamic revolution of 1979. Rather, I have concentrated on a more intimate, almost personal, exploration of the lives of ordinary women especially young girls studying at the universities. I am not suggesting that every woman who lives in Iran fits the same pattern, as the phenomenon of the Iranian Muslim women is far too complex to fit in any single model. I do think, however, that despite geographical, historical, and cultural differences between the real political tendencies, a somewhat similar pattern can be detected deductively.

### Different pictures

The modern discourse of modernity dealt with the relevance of secularism to Iranian society has gone through three distinct phases of constitutionalism (1905-1920s), nation-building (1920s-early 1940s), and nationalism (1940s-mid 1960s), through which Iranian women were introduced to the ideas on democracy, socialism, freedom, and technological progress. While most secular reformers accepted some of these ideas, most of the clerics, religious people and traditionalists rejected them. The outcome of their debates was a synthesis, which was represented in the first Iranian constitution and the constitutional movement marked a turning point in women's contributions to mass politics. New ideas were articulated, opportunities for political participation were developed, and the ground was prepared for the development of a woman's movement in Iran. However, women's participation in the movement and support for it was varied, and so its achievements were also mixed.

Toward a strong centralized and modern nation-building state, Reza Shah was the first to adopt secularization, modernity and the emancipation of women and the government took an active role in changing women's position. Characterizing women as the hallmark of modernity and progress, the two shahs of the Pahlavi incorporated women into their notions of nation-building and national progress. Again, the results were mixed; independent women's activities were banned, patriarchal family was preserved, Shari'a laws continued to be applied to family by the clergy on one hand, and women were integrated into social life, veils were removed forcefully, the judiciary was secularized and women's participation in education and selective employment was encouraged on the other. By the 1950s, this notion of modernity, which had received support from many secular nationalists, came under attack by both the secular and religious nationalists. During 1978-1979, these attacks culminated in the discourse of revolution and created much hope for a new social and political structure and provided "an opportunity millions of women had long been waiting for" as Hoodfar puts.[7]

The Islamic revolution of 1979, though ended the dominance of the discourse of secularity, it did not result in total rejection of modernity for a return to an Islamic past. The discourse of Islamization combined all elements of Islam, modernity and Iranian tradition. While most of the secular advancements of the Pahlavi era affecting women's life were eventually abolished, efforts of the Islamic feminist women, as well as the exigencies of the political formation of a government in modern times, forced the Islamic government to reinstate them, albeit in a modified form of Religious Democracy.[8]

In a response to the rapid economic changes which took place under secular and highly authoritarian governments[9] and the loss of identity and other political and social failures of the post-colonial period,[10] the Islamic revolution of 1979 cleared the path for a new dominant cultural and political climate. Women known as Islamists, conservatives and/or traditionalists who are actually religious fundamentalists, combated both domestic despotism and foreign imperialism with their limited resources in order to secure the Islamic laws, principles and values in not only their personal life but the social one as well. They sought political power in the name of religion and now are in prominent public and private positions, support peace and human dignity and help develop and popularize the Islamic gender ideology, but seemingly never will remain silent in the face of any attack to their national integrity and personal identity.

Fundamentalism, in this view, is a militant movement that accepts and even embraces the technological innovations of the West, but shuns many social and cultural aspects of modern society, particularly in the realm of the family. Fundamentalists believe they are carrying out the will of God, and are often intolerant of dissent both within and without the community of believers.[11] Although some such as John Esposito and Edward Sa'id have criticized indiscriminate use of the term,[12] despite significant regional and political differences among fundamentalists, they called for a return to more traditional norms for women, emphasizing women's roles in procreation, the adoption of "proper hijab" (the Islamic dress code), and submission to patriarchal values. The hijab, therefore, is not such a "manna from heaven for politicians facing crises" or a "division of labour" to send "back to the kitchen" as Mernissi argues,[13] or something that "saves young women from the expenses of acquiring many fashionable outfits"[14] but a piece of cloth to cover their body protecting them from sexual harassment in public and private places. The veil can offer women a certain degree of physical protection and if a veiled woman is harassed in public, she may loudly appeal to the chivalry and religiosity of the men around her who would certainly come to her help.

Contrary to some as Afsaneh Najmabadi who believes "Almost overnight, words such as androcracy (mardsalari) and misogyny (zan setizi) became common parlance",[15] Iranian women fundamentalists have never been passive and submissive objects who were coerced or simply duped into the Islamic

revolution. Women drawn to the revolution because of its emphasis on family and its demand for both women and men be placed a higher priority on raising children and family relations in general. Regardless of the pre-Revolutionary process of modernization and secularization that gave women greater economic and personal freedom and the power accompanying it, Iranian fundamentalist women dislike it because it resulted in men abandoning their customary obligations to the family too. Women who generally hold low status jobs in the capitalist market, and are overburdened with responsibility for children as well as care for the elderly, may in fact, writes Helen Hardacre, make "conscious decision to use the fundamentalist message to secure the husband's loyalty and support of them and their children."[16] The return to traditional and religious values may thus be attractive to the over-worked homemaker, worker, and mother who hope that her husband and community assume a greater share of her burden.

Sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti, ethnologist Aihwa Ong, anthropologists Erika Friedl and Mary Hegland, and political scientist Cynthia Enloe have all, in their respective areas of research, emphasized the disruptive consequences of shifting gender roles in developing societies, especially changes in the family in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. They suggest that we may be witnessing a growing interest in a return to a more traditional and seemingly secure patriarchal culture of the past in both women and men.[17] In examining the gender ideologies of several fundamentalist movements, as well as Iran, Janet Afary has found that:

> [G]ender relations are not a marginal aspect of these movements. Rather, an important strength of fundamentalism lies in its creation of the illusion that a return to traditional, patriarchal relations is the answer to the social and economic problems that both Western and non-Western societies face in the era of late capitalism.[18]

Owing to Iran's spiritualism and religious beliefs, fundamentalists consider a high respect for and praise the position of motherhood and guardianship of the heritage and the necessity of equal education for both men and women has facilitated access to an increasing human development which consists of reproductive health, population control, free education for everyone and elimination of all violence against women. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, the religious government has tried to represent women's rights and direct its attack at the objectification of women under Western-style capitalism. The criticisms of pornography and prostitution, and the many free social services it provides for women, such as exemption from military service and four months off before and after pregnancy with payment, have legitimized its representation of issues

of concern to women.

As a progressive discourse on Islam, the second picture of Iranian women is that of Islamic reformists who began in 1997 to challenge the fundamentalist discourse. Reformists including both men and women are constructing feminist and democratic discourses on Shi'ite Islam and argue for a more tolerant, diversity and egalitarian gender relations and more liberal perspectives on the issue of women's rights. The election of the more moderate President Mohammad Khatami in May 1997, and of reformist MPs of the Sixth Majles in 1999 whose support was particularly strong among women and youth, helped this movement to continue against some harsh and hard-line policies of the fundamentalists. Since then, reformists have striven to develop civil rights for women, to promote democracy, to advance fundamental freedoms and to strengthen the "Republic" portion of the Islamic Republic and women's human rights.



In May 1997, the third picture of secular intellectuals and feminists emerged too that in coalition with reformists, called for a reform of the orthodox conservative interpretation of Shi'a Islam and its reconciliation with democratic principles. Favoring the separation between religion and state, the secular women are willing to end polygamy, to sue for divorce, to retain custody of minor children, to share common marriage property upon divorce, civil liberties for both women and men, their equal civil rights with men including participation in public places, clothing, loving, enjoying life and others. An explicitly feminist agenda and regular features on divorce, sexual violence, and child custody can be seen in a few secular feminist magazines that translate foreign feminist articles too.



Reformism and secularism emerged strongly, but due to a definite contradiction of some of their demands with not only the Islamic fundamentals but the traditions and customs of Iranian patriarchal society as well lost the battle to their rival. The immense confrontation both from men and women of not only fundamentalists but from traditionalists and even within reformist and secularist own "Modern Islamists"[19] as well, they failed to attain all their goals especially to convince the fundamentalists to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CDEAW). Worse even, secularists have been marginalized from both mainstream fundamentalist and reformist women and they are denied political participation and candidacy for the parliament and the city councils.

**Table 1: Human Development Index (partial)**

| HDI rank | | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2002 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High human development | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | Norway | 0/866 | 0/886 | 0/897 | 0/911 | 0/935 | 0/954 | 0/956 |
| 2 | Sweden | 0.863 | 0.873 | 0.885 | 0.895 | 0.928 | 0.943 | 0.946 |
| 3 | Australia | 0.847 | 0.864 | 0.877 | 0.892 | 0.932 | 0.942 | 0.946 |
| 4 | Canada | 0.869 | 0.885 | 0.908 | 0.928 | 0.933 | 0.939 | 0.943 |
| 5 | Netherlands | 0.865 | 0.877 | 0.891 | 0.907 | 0.927 | 0.938 | 0.942 |
| 8 | United States | 0/866 | 0/886 | 0/899 | 0/914 | 0/926 | 0/935 | 0/939 |
| 12 | United Kingdom | 0/845 | 0/853 | 0/862 | 0/883 | 0/921 | 0/932 | 0/936 |
| 16 | France | 0/852 | 0/867 | 0/880 | 0/902 | 0/919 | 0/929 | 0/932 |
| 28 | Korea, Republic of | 0.705 | 0.741 | 0.779 | 0.817 | 0.852 | 0.878 | 0/888 |
| 53 | Mexico | 0/688 | 0/734 | 0/753 | 0/761 | 0/776 | 0/800 | 0/802 |
| Medium human development | | | | | | | | |
| 57 | Russian Federation | .. | .. | .. | 0/813 | 0/771 | .. | 0/795 |
| 59 | Malaysia | 0/614 | 0/657 | 0/693 | 0/720 | 0/759 | 0/789 | 0/793 |
| 72 | Brazil | 0/644 | 0/680 | 0/695 | 0/714 | 0/739 | 0/771 | 0/775 |
| 77 | Saudi Arabia | 0/602 | 0/656 | 0/671 | 0/707 | 0/741 | 0/764 | 0/768 |
| 88 | Turkey | 0/590 | 0/614 | 0/651 | 0/683 | 0/713 | .. | 0/751 |
| 94 | China | 0/523 | 0/557 | 0/593 | 0/627 | 0/683 | 0/721 | 0/745 |
| 96 | Sri Lanka | 0/613 | 0/648 | 0/674 | 0/698 | 0/719 | .. | 0/740 |
| **101** | **Iran, Islamic Rep. of** | **0/565** | **0/569** | **0/610** | **0/649** | **0/693** | **0/723** | **0/732** |
| 111 | Indonesia | 0.467 | 0.529 | 0.582 | 0.623 | 0.662 | 0.680 | 0/692 |
| 119 | South Africa | 0/655 | 0/672 | 0/697 | 0/729 | 0/735 | 0/69 | 0/666 |
| 120 | Egypt | 0.438 | 0.487 | 0.539 | 0.577 | 0.608 | .. | 0/653 |
| 127 | India | 0/411 | 0/437 | 0/476 | 0/514 | 0/548 | 0/579 | 0/595 |
| Low human development | | | | | | | | |
| 142 | Pakistan | 0/346 | 0/373 | 0/405 | 0/444 | 0/473 | .. | 0/497 |
| 151 | Nigeria | 0.324 | 0.385 | 0.401 | 0.430 | 0.455 | .. | 0/466 |
| 177 | Sierra Leone | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | 0/273 |

Source: http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/

Regardless the enforcement of a complete hijab and punishment of secular women on charges of "improper hijab", many developments have occurred in the areas of birth control and abortion, child custody of war martyrs, education, divorce and marriage law, and employment including the right to become judges. It is true that Iranian women and men are segregated in schools, on buses, and on beaches and some legal and custom restrictions are on women in their choice of career, such as in leadership and presidential, employment, such as need for permission of father or husband, and education in some fields, but nobody can deny the fact that Iranian women have never been historically so active in the social and political life of the country, holding high academic, managerial, and even political positions. Many fundamentalists now have broken with many earlier traditions. They attend the university, to seek outside professional employment, to socialize with their peers in mass organizations that promote the Islamist ideology, and even to choose their own husband based on

individual choice in these gatherings rather than submit to arranged and semi-arranged marriages and remain politically involved even after marriage. Monitoring human development of the UN 177 members, the UN report of 2004 has classified Iran in the rank of 101. (See table 1)



**Iran's Human Development Comparing with the Highest and Lowest Countries**
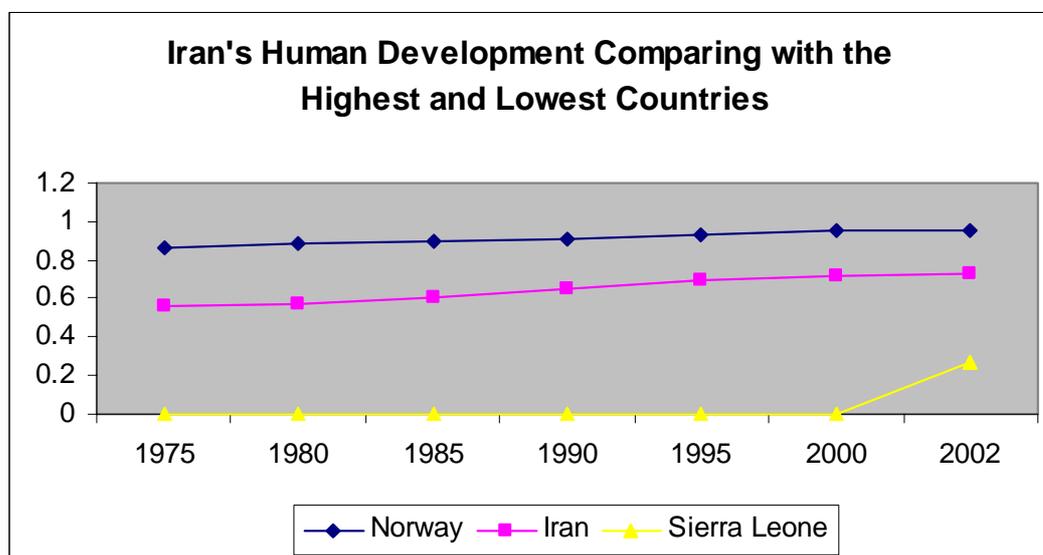
A recent report by Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) indicates that while the employment rate of the Iranian women has decreased from 85.01% in 1997 to 79.55% in 2003, their sociopolitical participation in candidacy of the Majlis and the number of MPs has increased 53.81%, from 6.43% in 1997 to 9.89% in 2003 (12 out of 290 are women now). According to this report, high ranking managing positions of women has also increased from 1.99% to 2.11% and that of specialists from 27.16% to 29.64% which indicates an increase of 6.01% and 9.13% respectively. The female students admitted to the universities have annually been increasing so that in 2004 it consisted 62% of the whole.[20] The women's membership in university faculties too, according to Zahra Shojae, the President advisor in women's affairs, increased to an unprecedented percentage of 17.4 of the whole, women found an academic approach in the 3rd decade of the Islamic revolution and the government increased its financial credits to 385 times than before, all of which shows the governments determination to fill the gender gaps and remove the sexual inequalities.[21] Substantial women's organizations, official, government-affiliated and nongovernmental, and tens of women's periodicals of various political shades attest to the significance and complexities of these reconfigurations which reflects all feminist walks of life. Praising this "incredible flourishing of women's intellectual and cultural production," the secular feminist, Afsaneh Najmabadi, concludes:

> not only have women not disappeared from public life, they have an unmistakably active and growing presence in practically every field of artistic creation, professional achievement, educational and industrial institutions, political participation, and even in sports activities.[22]

## *Conclusion*

None of the discourses on women have been monolithic or fixed. Each changed from time to time; meant different things to different groups; and had varied impacts on women depending on their social class, ethnicity, place of residence, role in production, and religion.

Feminist discourses in Iran do not share completely the Western inspired struggle for freedom, democracy, and socialism. In the West, the struggle of Black and Native peoples, immigrants, ethnic groups, as well as Whites are rampant but there is no such a struggle within Iranian society. Even the western feminist emancipation for women that means the free exercise of body and mind, ending degrading traditions that limit women's choices and enabling women to pursue alternative lifestyle is not acceptable by the most Iranian women. But that does not mean that we may not succeed to find any common solution for the lost natural rights of women.

Women's issue is nothing but part of the human being issues and only a whole compassing approach will help us improve its implications. Promoting equal access to education for all and economic opportunities according to everyone's eligibility, funding and running training programs for both men and women to get informed and to respect the rights of all men, women and children, supporting associating freely, expressing views publicly, debating policies openly, and petitioning the government may be helpful too. Full and equal participation of women in all aspects of life especially in politics may be optimum but can not and may not be enforced. Rejecting the notion of relation between politics and gender, I do not believe that women are too good for politics or it is a far reaching field of study and profession for them but strongly view politics as "above sex" and insist that women themselves should freely choose to involve in any field according to their appetence, competency and ability and hope for a day when people as equals participate in deciding common goals. On the whole it seems that women are politically kept marginal because they hate to do politics and they love the children and home more than men.

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[11] See Marty Martin E. and Appleby Scott R., eds., (I991), The Fundamentalism Project: Fundamentalisms Observed, Vol. I, Chicago, pp. IX-X. Bernard Lewis prefers the term "fundamentalism" because use of the terms "Islamic" or "Islamist" to identify such movements implies that "this is what the Islamic religion and civilization is about". See "Unentretien avec Bernard Lewis", Le Monde, 16 November 1993; see also Munson Henry, Jr., (1988), Islam and Revolution in the Middle East, New Haven pp. 3-4.

[12] In Sa'id's view, by constructing reductive notions of "terrorism" and "fundamentalism", the West has attempted to claim for itself "moderation, rationality" and a specific Western ethos. See Sa'id Edward, (1993), Culture and Imperialism, New York p. 375-7. See also John Esposito, (1993), "Secular Bias and Islamic Revivalism", Chronicle of Higher Education, 26 May, p. 44. I have used the terms "fundamentalism" and "Islamism" for the conservative movements, but not the term "Islamic", leaving space for other more democratic interpretations of Islam to be discussed later.

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