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### FURTHER READING

Delia Davin's (1985) 'The Single-child Family Policy in the Countryside', in E. Croll *et al.* (eds) *China's One-child Family Policy*, is a comprehensive account of the implementation of the one-child policy in rural China.

Susan Greenhalgh's (1990) *The Peasantization of Population Policy in Shaanxi: Cadre Mediation of the State-Society Conflict* examines the evolution of state-society relations in rural China in the area of population control by using retrospective field data from three villages in the north-western province of Shaanxi.

Susan Greenhalgh's (1992) *Negotiating Birth Control in Village China* takes a close look at the implementation of the one-child policy through a field research in a village in Shaanxi province.

## Chapter 8

# Women and the politics of fundamentalism in Iran

*Haleh Afshar*

This chapter is concerned with understanding what Islamic fundamentalism means to women who choose to adopt it and how, if at all, it could be used as a means for political struggles. The intention is to move away from the usual condemnatory approach to Islamic fundamentalism and consider it in the light of the views and activities of its adherents. Specific examples will be given with reference to Iran and the women's organisations and their activities in that country.

### WHAT IS FUNDAMENTALISM?

Fundamentalism has for long been associated with greater or lesser degrees of oppression of women. Given the rise of fundamentalism and the decision of many women to consciously reject feminisms of various kinds and adopt the creed, it is important for some of us to consider what it is and why so many have chosen it. We should stand back and separate state and theocratic policies from choices made by some women. It is worth while to consider the reasons that the Muslim women have offered for adopting Islamic fundamentalism and 'returning to the source' both in the UK and elsewhere.

Part of the problem of understanding fundamentalism has been in terms of definitions and terminology. Muslims themselves do not use the term 'fundamentalist' at all; the twentieth-century Islamists argue that they are revivalists, and are returning to the sources of Islam to regain a purified vision, long since lost in the mire of worldly governments. Shi'as, who are a minority school of Islam, but form 98 per cent of the Iranian population, have for long seen themselves as the guardians of the poor, the dispossessed and those trampled on by unjust governments (Momen 1985). For them revivalism is merely a matter of succeeding in their centuries-long struggle against injustice.

Thus fundamentalism for the Muslims is a return to the roots and a recapturing of both the purity and the vitality of Islam as it was at its inception. In this pursuit of the past, the Muslims, like all those glorifying their histories, are returning to an imaginary golden episode to lighten the difficulties of their present-day existence (Chhachhi 1991). The golden age for the

Shiias is the short-term rule of the Prophet, about a decade long, and the even shorter one of his nephew and son-in-law Ali, who ruled for less than five years. The Sunnis, who accept the first four caliphs of Islam as being pure and worthy of emulating, can lay claim to about forty years of just rule; from the *hijra*, the Prophet's move to Madina in 622 to Ali's death in AD 661. In addition all Muslims claim to adhere absolutely to the Koranic laws and accept the Koran as representing the very words of God as revealed to his Prophet Muhammad.

The Koran which is divided into 114 Suras, contains expressly or impliedly, all the divine commands. These commands are contained in about 500 verses and of these about 80 may be regarded by WESTERN lawyers as articles of a code.

(Afchar 1987: 86).

Thus in their pursuit of the golden age the Muslims are equipped with fifty years of history and 500 verses of a holy book, and a clutch of legal clauses, perhaps as good a resource as those offered by any other ideologies or utopists' vision.

But like all utopias the past and the holy book have difficulties adjusting to the present. It is in the domain of interpretation and adjustments to history that Islam is deemed to have become degraded. Yet without such adjustments, it would find it hard to survive as a creed. Thus the notions of return and revivalism are very much anchored in the processes of interpretations and adjustments. They seek to present new interpretations, puritanical interpretations, interpretations that wipe out the centuries of misdeed and hardship and open the way for the future.

## WOMEN AND REVIVALISM

In the twentieth-century domain of interpretations, women have been active in their own right. Although the bulk of Islamic theology has been adapted and interpreted by male theologians, who have claimed exclusive rights to instituting the Islamic laws, *Shari'a*, women have always maintained a presence, albeit a small one, in the domains of politics and theology (Abbott 1942; Ahmed 1992; Keddie and Baron 1991; Mernissi 1991). They have consistently and convincingly argued that Islam as a religion has always had to accommodate women's specific needs. Since the first convert to Islam was the Prophet's redoubtable and wealthy wife Khadija, no religion which she accepted could discriminate against women. Khadija, who was nearly twenty years older than the Prophet, had first employed him as her trade representative and subsequently commanded him to marry her, overcoming his reserve and reluctance by informing his uncle that she was the very best wife that he could ever have. Their marriage was a happy one and the Prophet did not take another wife till after her death.

Thus some fourteen centuries ago Islam recognised women's legal and economic independence as existing and remaining separate from that of their fathers or husbands and sons. Islamic marriage was conceived as a matter of contract between consenting partners (Koran 4:4, 4:24), and one that stipulated a specific price, *mahr*, payable to the bride before the consummation of marriage. Women must be maintained in the style to which they have been accustomed (2:238, 4:34) and paid for suckling their babies (2:233).

Beside having personal and economic independence, women were also close confidantes and advisers to the Prophet. Khadija supported him in the early years and undoubtedly her influence protected the Prophet against the various Meccan nobles who wished to quench Islam at its inception. After her death Muhammad's favourite wife Aishah, who married him as a child and grew up in his household, became not only his spouse, but also his closest ally and confidante. She is known as one of the most reliable interpreters of Islamic laws.

Besides being a renowned source for the interpretation and extension of Islamic laws, Aishah was also an effective politician and a remarkable warrior; like many of the Prophet's wives, she accompanied him on his campaigns. After his death she ensured that her father Abu Bakre, and not Muhammad's nephew Ali, succeeded to the caliphate, and led the Muslim community. Subsequently, when Ali became the Caliph, Aishah raised an army and went to battle against him, taking to the field herself. Although she was defeated, Ali treated her with respect, but begged her not to interfere in politics.

Thus, if fundamentalism is about returning to the golden age of Islam, Muslim women argue that they have much reason for optimism and much room for manoeuvre. Furthermore many highly educated and articulate Muslim women regard Western feminism as a poor example and have no wish to follow it. Not only do they dismiss Western feminism for being one of the many instruments of colonialism, but also they despise the kind of freedom that is offered to women under the Western patriarchy (Ahmed 1992; al-Ghazali nd; Rahnavard nd). Using much of the criticism provided by Western women themselves, the Islamist women argue that by concentrating on labour market analysis and offering the experiences of a minority of white affluent middle-class women as a norm, Western feminists have developed an analysis which is all but irrelevant to the lives of the majority of women the world over (Afshar 1994a; 1994b). They are of the view that Western-style feminist struggles have liberated women only to the extent that they are prepared to become sex objects and market their sexuality as an advertising tool to benefit patriarchal capitalism (al-Ghazali nd; Rahnavard nd). They are particularly critical of the failure of Western feminism to carve an appropriate, recognised and remunerated space for marriage and motherhood. They argue that by locating the discussion in the domain of production and attempting to gain equality for women, Western feminists have sought and failed to make women into quasi men. They have failed to alter the labour market to accom-

moderate women's needs and at the same time have lost the benefits that women had once obtained in matrimony. Thus Western feminists have made women into permanent second-class citizens. Not a model that most women, in the West as elsewhere, would choose to follow.

By contrast the Islamist women argue that they can benefit by returning to the sources of Islam. They are of the view that Islamic dictum bestows complementarity on women, as human beings, as partners to men and as mothers and daughters. They argue that Islam demands respect for women and offers them opportunities, to be learned, educated and trained, while at the same time providing an honoured space for them to become mothers, wives and homemakers. They argue that unlike capitalism, and much of feminist discourse, Islam recognises the importance of women's life cycles: they have been given different roles and responsibilities at different times of their lives and at each and every stage they are honoured and respected for that which they do. They argue that Islam at its inception has provided them with exemplary female role models and has delineated a path that can be honourably followed at each stage. For all Muslims Khadija is a powerful representative of independence as well as being a supportive wife. Muhammad's daughter Fatima, for the Shi'as in particular, provides an idealised and idolised role model as daughter to the Prophet and wife to the imam, Ali. The Sunnis admire Aishah for her powerful intellect as well as her political leadership. Thus, the revivalists contend, Muslim women have no need of Western examples, which are in any case alien and exploitative. They have their own path to liberation which they wish to pursue.

Islamist women are particularly defensive of the veil. The actual imposition of the veil and the form that it has taken is a contested domain (Mernissi 1991). Nevertheless many Muslim women have chosen the veil as the symbol of Islamification and have accepted it as the public face of their revivalist position. For them the veil is a liberating, and not an oppressive, force. They maintain that the veil enables them to become the observers and not the observed; that it liberates them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the demands of the beauty myth. In the context of the patriarchal structures that shape women's lives the veil is a means of bypassing sexual harassment and 'gaining respect'.<sup>1</sup>

As post-modernism takes hold and feminists deconstruct their views and allow more room for specific and differing needs, demands and priorities of women of different creeds and colours (Afshar 1995; Mirza 1989) it is no longer easy to offer pat denials of the Islamic women's positions.

## IRAN AND THE PRACTICAL POLITICS OF ISLAMIST WOMEN

Like all political theories, the Islamist women's has had difficulties in standing the test of time. Although Islam does provide a space for women, it has been

as difficult for Muslim women, as for their Western counterparts, to obtain and maintain their rights. The throng of women who supported the Islamic revolution in Iran were no exception to this rule. On its inception the Islamic Republic embarked on a series of misogynist laws, decrees and directives which rapidly curtailed the access of women to much of the public domain. Female judges were sacked the faculty of law closed its door to female applicants and Article 163 of the Islamic constitution stated that women cannot become judges.

Subsequently the Islamic laws of retribution, *Qassas*, severely eroded women's legal rights. Not only are two women's evidence equated with that of one man, as required by the Koran (2:82), but women's evidence, if uncorroborated by men, is no longer accepted by the courts. Women who insist on giving uncorroborated evidence are judged to be lying and subject to punishment for slander (Article 92 of the *Qassas* laws). Murder is now punished by retribution; but the murderer can opt for the payment of *dayeh*, blood money, to the descendants of the murdered, in lieu of punishment (Article 1 of the *Qassas* laws). Furthermore the murderer can be punished only if the family of the victim pays the murderer's blood money to his descendants:

Should a Muslim man wilfully murder a Muslim woman, he must be killed, the murderer can be punished only after the woman's guardian has paid half of his *dayeh* (blood money, or the sum that the man would be worth if he were to live a normal life; this is negotiated with and paid to the man's family;)

(Article 5 of the *Qassas* laws)

Whereas killing a man is a capital offence, murdering a woman is a lesser crime. The same logic dictates that women murderers should have little or no blood money and must be executed (Article 6). Similarly if a man attacks a woman, and maims or severely injures her, he can be punished only if the injured or her family pay retribution money so that the assailant can be similarly mutilated; this is to ensure that his dependants have secured the income lost through the implementation of the retribution laws. No such money is paid to the dependants of women assailants (Article 60).

What is worse, fathers, who are recognised as the automatic guardians of the household, have the right of life and death over their children. Fathers who murder their children are 'excused' from punishment, provided they pay blood money to the inheritors (Article 16); however, there is no specific blood money stipulated for children. Fathers who murder one or more of their children, are to pay themselves the blood money! Khomeini decided to return to all fathers their Islamic automatic right of custody of children on divorce, which they had lost under the 1976 Family Laws in Iran. By doing so and legislating the *Qassas* laws, the post-revolutionary state endowed fathers with the undisputed right of life and death over their children. Men gained the right to kill anyone who 'violated their harem'. Men who murder their wives,

or their sisters or mothers, on the charge of adultery, are not subject to any punishment. But women are not given any such rights. Nor do they have the right of life and death over their children.

In addition the access of women to almost 50 per cent of university departments was barred and they were encouraged to abandoned paid employment (Afshar 1982: 79–90; 1992; Tabari and Yeganeh 1982). They could not be employed without the formal consent of their husband, a rule that after much struggle was extended to apply to both marriage partners before the revolution, but was revised in favour of men afterwards. Politically too women were marginalised; Article 115 of the Islamic constitution follows Ayatollah Khomeini's instructions in insisting that the leader of the nation, *Valayat-e Faqih*, would be a man, and so would the president. Since its inception the Islamic Republic has never had a female member of the cabinet and the numbers of female *Majlis*, (parliamentary) representatives had been fewer than five in all but the last *Majlis*, when they reached twelve.

Thus with the arrival of the Islamic Republic, with the notable exception of the vote, Iranian women lost all they had struggled for over a century. The situation seemed grim indeed.

### THE POLITICS OF FEMINIST FUNDAMENTALISM

But to despair of the plight of women is to fail to recognise the formidable resilience of Iranian women. They refused to be daunted by this onslaught of patriarchy, as they had been for the past hundred years or more. Although some bowed to the pressures of the Islamic Republic, many remained firm, both as women and as believers in the faith. There has been a long and determined struggle by secularist women. But it was as devout Muslims that elite women in Iran (Moghissi 1994) have most successfully countered the demands made of them by the Islamic Republic. Given the Islamic nature of the national political discourse,<sup>2</sup> the defenders of the faiths of women took the republic to task for failing to deliver its Islamic duties. For post-revolutionary Iranian elite women, revivalism has almost literally been a God-send. They have used it to fight against their political, legal and economic marginalisation. Although victory is yet to come, they have won considerable grounds and are continuing to do so. Throughout, their arguments have been anchored in the teachings of Islam, the Koranic laws and the traditions and practices of the Prophet of Islam.

Using the Koranic instruction that all Muslims must become learned, women have finally succeeded in removing many of the bars placed on their education. Women who gained their training and expertise in the pre-revolutionary days of equality now command high salaries and many run their own successful businesses in the private sector (Afshar 1992). Private sector schools have simply defied the laws of gender segregation and employed male science and mathematics teachers to teach girls. As a result Iranian girls regularly come top in the university entrance examinations in most subjects.

### THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

Before the revolution Iranian women had, at least on paper, obtained the right to equal employment. But although the post-revolutionary state accepted this right, in practice Islamification has led to a severe cut-back in female employment rates (Afshar 1992). Nevertheless neither the public nor the private sector could operate without female employees, nor for that matter could most households survive without the women's income. Thus despite the government's policies, women continue to have a presence in the workforce, though in terms of percentage, it is much lower than before the revolution; whereas according to the 1966 and 1976 censuses some 13 to 14 per cent of women of working age were in paid employment, the post-revolutionary census of 1986 indicated that only 9 per cent were in paid employment. This was a clear reflection of the government's policies which disapproved of the entry of women into all but a few 'suitable' professions such as teaching and nursing and the refusal of the civil service to employ women in other fields. In addition the segregation of work places and public transport, the cutting back on child care provisions and unfavourable tax systems all made it harder for women to participate fully in paid employment.

These discriminatory practices were legitimised by some women appointees who had no difficulty in using Khomeini's teachings to support such activities. A clear example is Shahla Habibi who, in 1991, was appointed to the newly created post of presidential adviser on women's affairs.

Typically her previous post had been with the national Islamic Propaganda Organisation. She reminded the public that Khomeini had placed women in the home and had declared that:

Women, whatever qualifications they may have or however learned they may be, must remain the pivotal core of the family and play their parts as exemplary housewives.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 7 January 1992)

In this she was fully supported by the government sponsored Women's Organisation. In December 1990 it had already declared:

As the imam [Khomeini] has repeatedly said good men are raised in the laps of good women. If we follow this example then we'd find our true station in life and recognise that motherhood is a sacred and holy duty of women.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 25 December 1990)

A view shared by the High Council of Women's Cultural and Social Affairs which was appointed by the High Council of Cultural Revolution to co-ordinate government policies on women. It was staffed with women like Soraya Maknoun, university professor who headed the Council's Employment

Research Group. Maknoun chose to disregard her own highly paid position and blithely denounced all demands for equal opportunities as corruptive and pro-Western:

I am totally against the view that women's success depends on gaining access to equal opportunities in all sectors of the economy. . . . The truth is that our society does not have a women's problem and it's just pro-Western critics who have invented such a problem and imposed it on our lives.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 27 January 1990).

Marzieh Mohamadianfar, who was appointed to head the Council's Employment Committee, held a similar view. In a country where the staple food is rice, a grain which is almost entirely cultivated by women, Marzieh Mohamadianfar declared:

You see there are some activities which are based on physical strength and so are beyond women . . . we cannot deny that men are physically stronger. So there are jobs like cultivation and agricultural work which women simply cannot do.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 27 January 1990)

Not surprisingly the Employment Committee of the High Council of Women's Social and Cultural Affairs declared itself satisfied with the segregation of the labour market. It came to the conclusion that women were physically ill suited to certain tasks. Mrs Mohamadianfar declared that the existing restrictions on female employment were not disadvantageous, but merely reflected the 'nature' of the female condition:

The existing laws and regulations are not detrimental to the rights of working women and we do not need to revise them. It is not the law that is deficient, it is its implementation.

. . . It is the male employers who won't employ women. Of course women do cause their own problems. When they are giving birth or suckling their babies, they cannot work. That is why men prefer to employ men. So women graduates cannot hope to get the kinds of jobs that are offered to men and earn similar salaries even in the fields that are open to them to work in.

. . . We must also be aware that if we insist on welfare and special facilities for female employees, then the managers would simply refuse to employ women.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 27 January 1990)

So the government's supporters condemned special welfare provisions for women and condemned women themselves for being potential mothers and therefore inefficient workers. With such friends in high places, Iranian women do not need any enemies. As a teacher told the weekly women's magazine *Zaneh Rouz*:

Some of the women in positions of influence forget how they got there and in doing so not only they fail all other women, but also they weaken the very fabric of our society.

(27 January 1990)

But the women supporters of the government have been firmly and continuously opposed by women such as Azam Taleqani, the campaigning daughter of the late Ayatollah Taleqani and member of the first post-revolutionary *Majlis*. Azam Taleqani founded the Women's Society of Islamic Revolution, which has been ceaselessly defending women's rights. She is an extremely well-informed, outspoken and tireless critic of the government's discriminatory policies:

Two-thirds of women in this country live and work in the rural areas and carry a major burden of agricultural activity. Nevertheless we do not allow our women to study agricultural sciences at the University.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 25 December 1990)

Similarly Zahra Rahnavard, a leading Islamic feminist and the wife of the previous Iranian Prime Minister, Mir Hussein Mussavi, denounced discrimination against women on religious and political grounds:

Our planners say 'we don't have the means to invest equally in men and women and must spend our limited resources on those who provide the highest return for our society. Therefore as women's natural obligations, in giving birth and raising their children, means that they work less, we cannot allocate too great a portion of our resources to them.'

We respond that this is wrong since all Muslim are required to pursue knowledge regardless of their gender. It is of the essence, in terms of religious requirement and social well-being, that no barriers be put between women and their quest for knowledge.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 10 February 1990)

By placing the argument squarely in the Islamic domain, Rahnama, Taleqani and others succeeded in gaining the support of some of the leading politicians, like the long-serving, enlightened Minister of Interior, Hojatoleslam Nateq Nouri. He declared:

Islam places no limitation whatever on the participation of women in the public, political and cultural domains.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 14 March 1985)

In fact women have retained their entitlement to equal rights of access to the labour market in Iran after the revolution. They had even been promised a less discriminatory future at the inception of the Islamic Republic. Article 43 of the Constitution undertakes to provide employment opportunities for all and states that full employment is a fundamental aim of the revolution. Thus,

even after the revolution, the Constitution, Labour Laws and the State Employment Laws make no distinction between men and women. As Azam Taleqani explained:

Article 28 of our constitution declares that anyone can choose any profession that they wish, provided they do not contravene Islam and public and social interests. The government must provide equal opportunities for every one in every job according to social needs. The failure to implement this law properly has destroyed the trust of women in Islam and the government. When you ask a woman civil servant what do you think about Islam? The only answer is 'they have destroyed me! You only have to read the notices that are plastered all over the walls, you only have to see the way that they are treating me. They think of me as an easily exploitable being. They have reduced me to the level of beasts of burden; they have no respect for me, or for what I do!' This is the heart felt cry of working women and there is no one to hear them, they have destroyed the women workers, squeezed the working day, squeezed the very life out of them and destroyed their self respect.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 25 December 1990)

Of course in practice women do not benefit from equal pay for equal work provisions. Married women pay higher taxes on their incomes than do married men; and women pay higher child insurance premiums than do men. It is the men who benefit from the married man's entitlement whereas it is usually women who end up paying for nursery care of their children. Men get larger bonuses, because it is assumed that they are the head of household, and they are entitled to cheap goods from the civil service co-operatives; their share increases with the numbers of their children. Not so for women who do not even get a share for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Zahra Rahnavard warned the government that such discriminations eroded much of women's support for the regime. By 1990 she had to admit that at least the government, if not the revolution, had failed women:

We have no strategy for including women in this country's destiny and in this respect we have fallen far short of our political aspiration. . . . In the five years plan women are only mentioned once . . . despite all our protests we have remained invisible. It is essential that women's role in the development process is clearly delineated.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 10 February 1990)

### THE POLITICS OF ACTIVISM, RESISTANCE AND COMPROMISE

Activists such as Rahnavard and Taleqani persevered and eventually found a foothold in the High Council of Cultural Revolution, which determines

policies at a national level. There they managed to formulate an Islamic female employment policy. On 11 August 1992, seventeen months after Zahra Rahnavard had joined the Council, it issued an official document on female employment. Despite President Rafsanjani's directives to the Council 'to educate women about the correct ways of dealing with their husband and children' (*Zaneh Rouz* 26 December 1991) the Council chose to educate the rulers about women's liberation, by making concessions and focusing on areas where it was possible to make gains. Its statement applauded the revolution for returning women to the pedestal of honour and respectability:

Women in society who under the past regime had, in the name of freedom, suffered great oppression and lost many of their human and Islamic rights have had the opportunity to free themselves of the cheap Westoxificated voyeuristic societal gaze and find their real and pure Islamic status. . . . Thus the Muslim Iranian woman is on the one hand faithfully fulfilling her pivotal social task in the familial context. . . . On the other hand where there has been a need and a correct context Iranian women have remained active in the educational, social and economic domains.

The High Council accepted that women's first priority was to remain within the home and care for the family. But it argued that Islam offered women the opportunity of fulfilling all their potentials and was capable of enabling them to live their life cycles to the full. Therefore the Committee requested that 'suitable jobs' be provided for women in fields such as:

midwifery and similar medical posts as well as teaching (Article 5A).

Jobs which best suit the nature and temperament of women such as laboratory work, electronic engineering, pharmacology, welfare work and translation work (Article 5B).

Employment where men and women are equally suitable such as simple workers in service and technical industries. In such cases experience and qualifications, rather than gender must be the determining factor for selection of the work force (Article 5C).

Where the Council's resolution is of interest is that it argues that the government should enable women to fulfil both their domestic and their paid duties. In addition to equal pay for equal work, in the segment of the labour market allocated to women, the government should also allow women paid time off to enable them to fulfil their 'mothering obligations'. They should be entitled to shorter working hours and an earlier retirement age; measures which would recognise women's double burden of unpaid domestic work and paid employment.

It is worth noting that in 1985 the government had passed a Bill to facilitate half-time working for mothers of young children. Since the law required full-rate contributions towards their pension funds, and the state made no tax allowance for part-time workers, only 1 per cent of the female civil servants

chose this option. Most women simply could not afford to give up half of their salary.

If, as the Council has suggested, the recognition of 'mothering duties' results in some flexibility in working hours, without cut-backs in pay, then women workers would indeed fare much better. At the moment, despite all the lip-service paid to complementarity in marriage and women's special qualities, Iranian women workers have to work as a 'manpower' in an inflexibly male labour market. For example work and schools start at the same time, as do nurseries. There are few workplace nurseries and so most women have to travel considerable distances during rush hours depositing and collecting their children. As a result they are usually late for work. Most factories have two fortnight-long holidays, one for the Persian new year in late March and one during the summer. The factories close for that period. Women are not allowed to use their paid holiday leave in small portions to deal with a sick child or do their 'mothering' duties; all such obligations have to be shouldered as unpaid leave. Furthermore anyone who accumulates more than four months' unpaid leave in any working year can be sacked, even from tenured posts.

If the High Council's recommendations go through, at least some of these problems may be alleviated. In addition the proposal demanded that working women be entitled to job security, unemployment benefits and welfare provisions (Article 10). Women who are heads of household are to be entitled to special retraining programmes to enable them to return to the labour market (Article 11) and the government is urged to provide co-operative type organisations to facilitate home working for women who wish to combine their paid and unpaid jobs (Article 12). Thus, in return for accepting women's domestic obligations, the Council's proposal sought to extract concessions which would enable women to fulfil both their paid and unpaid duties. Its declaration forms part of the slow, but continuous progress of women in Iran in clawing back the rights that were summarily curtailed by the post-revolutionary state.

## WOMEN IN PUBLIC AND POLITICS

Although they fought shoulder to shoulder with men, women were not given high office by the revolutionary government. It has never appointed a woman to a ministerial post, a point made by Zahra Rahnavaard in 1990 when she complained:

Women have been and continue to be present at times in larger numbers than men, in our public demonstrations, for the revolution and in its support. But when it comes to public appointments, they are pushed aside. . . . Women like myself have continuously campaigned for better conditions. We have made our demands in the *Majlis*, in the press and in the public domain. But no one has taken any notice and our voices are not heard.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 10 February 1990)

But getting elected is only the first step, women members of *Majlis* are severely constrained by the ideological views that designate them as inferior, demands of them to be modest, silent and invisible (Milani 1992), and defines them as interlopers in the public domain. Maryam Behrouzi, a veteran representative who had served a prison sentence before the revolution and whose 16-year-old son was 'martyred' in the Iran-Iraq war, still found herself firmly discriminated against. She pointed out that women are never elected to high-powered committees. Nor did they become chair or officers of other parliamentary committees (*Zaneh Rouz* 30 January 1988). Azam Taleqani, who gained a seat in the first post-revolutionary *Majlis*, explained that women were expected to be 'naturally modest' and this prevented them from 'saying too much in the *Majlis*' (*Zaneh Rouz* 20 January 1991).

In April 1991, as the country was preparing for the parliamentary elections, Maryam Behrouzi demanded that Bills allowing an earlier retirement age for women, reforming some of the more draconian divorce laws (Mir-Hosseini 1993a: 59-84; 1993b) and provision of national insurance for women and children be put before the next session of the *Majlis*. Behrouzi also asked for the laws to be reformed to allow single women to travel abroad to continue their studies. This request was not endorsed by Habibi; she stated that such an act would devalue Iranian women and knock them off their perch of purity:

Since women are the public face of our society and the guardians of our honour, we must not intentionally dispatch them to a corrupt environment [i.e. the West].

(*Zaneh Rouz* 29 October 1990)

In the subsequent *Majlis* twelve women were elected. They have been fighting hard on women's issues. Although they lost their demands for the establishment of a Parliamentary Women's Committee, they have made some gains.

In a remarkable move, *Majlis* representatives Behrouzi, Monireh Nobakht and Marzieh Vahid Datgerdi managed to alter the divorce laws to make it more expensive for men to leave their wives at will. The Islamic government had restored the male prerogative to easy divorce. But, except for a brief period, the post-revolutionary government had not succeeded in closing down the Family Courts set up before the revolution to curb divorce, or defend the aggrieved party, who was usually the wife, in familial disputes. By using the marriage contract, and insisting on the Koranic right to fair treatment, many Iranian women had continued using the Family Courts as bargaining counters in their divorce proceedings (Mir-Hosseini 1993a; 1993b). On the whole the courts favoured the men and on divorce women were not entitled to any of their husband's property. Activists such as Azam Taleqani had gone on arguing fiercely against the gender-blind attitudes of the courts:

Unfortunately after the revolution . . . the government and the religious institution have not paid enough attention to women as full human beings.

All their efforts has been concentrated on making women stay at home, at all cost; to make them accept self sacrifice, oppression and submission. Even when they go to court to get their due, I am not saying that the courts are totally patriarchal; but unfortunately there are these tendencies. So the problem is presented in a way that does not illuminate the truth.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 25 December 1990)

In the event Behrouzi and her colleagues insisted that the *Majlis* should give women their Islamic dues. The 1993 Bill sought to curtail men's automatic right of divorce, by demanding that men who 'unjustly' divorce their 'obedient' wives should do their Koranic duty and pay 'wages' for the wife's domestic services during their married years.

Behrouzi also succeeded in pushing through a Bill which allowed women to retire after twenty years of active service, while the men still had to serve twenty-five years. Her success was in part achieved because it permitted women to return to their proper sphere, that of domesticity, all the sooner.

For those who were actively campaigning for women, this Bill was a remarkable success, since the path of women's liberation has been less than smooth. In 1991 the Women's Cultural-Social Council, despite its conservative membership, still submitted thirteen women's projects to the High Council of Cultural Revolution; but only one of these was considered and ratified by the Council. It was a proposal to eliminate the prejudicial treatment of women in higher education and in the selection for degree courses. This was no mean feat since there were discriminatory measures against women in 119 academic subject areas (*Zaneh Rouz* 31 August 1991).

## WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

It was in quangos and organisations outside the direct control of the government that women activists were most successful in struggling for better economic and political opportunities. Although in the public domain success depended on espousing an Islamic stance, Islam itself is sufficiently flexible to allow a diversity of interpretation and much leeway for women. Azam Taleqani, for example, set up the Women's Society of Islamic Revolution, a non-governmental activist group, whose members have included Zahra Rahnavard, the path-breaking Islamist writer and the wife of the long-serving post-revolutionary Prime Minister Musavi, as well as more conservative women such as *Majlis* representative Gohar Dastqeb, and Monirch Gorgi, a woman representative in the Assembly of Experts, which is responsible for nominating the national leader.

Within the civil service it was younger women in the lower echelons of the governmental organisations who fought effectively for the cause. By 1992 the Minister of Interior had been prevailed upon to set up women's affairs committees to serve the social councils in all the provinces. Women working

on these committees were much clearer about their aims than Mrs Habibi ever could be. A good example is Jaleh Shahrin Afshar, a member of Western Azarbaijan's women's committee, who told the press that first and foremost the women wished to be independent, furthermore they sought better employment opportunities and needed more facilities to embark on a wide-ranging family planning programme (*Zaneh Rouz* 29 August 1992). They had taken their demands directly to the *Majlis*. But the only one of their suggestions to meet with approval was the family planning one.

## THE POPULATION DEBATE

By 1987 the Statistical Centre of Tehran was indicating that 96 per cent of the urban women of child-bearing age were married and only 1 per cent had never married. The non-literate women married at around 16 and literate women at 17.5. But only 7 per cent of married women used any form of family planning. The average age for the first birth was 19, but it increased to 21 for women with secondary education. On average mothers had four live births, rather more than their stated desired average of two in urban areas and three in rural areas. Interestingly over half of the women questioned did not mind whether they had a son or a daughter; 14 per cent actually preferred to have a daughter and only 31 per cent had a marked son preference.<sup>4</sup>

Thus by 1990 the Iranian population reached 59.5 million and was growing at an average annual rate of 3.9 per cent. Although there was some disquiet, the devout were not panicking. Nevertheless both the high birth rates and temporary marriages came under new scrutiny. The daily newspapers warned that the country had only 12 million hectares of cultivable land which would feed 30 million people at most (*Zaneh Rouz* 18 September 1991). But some people like the *Majlis* deputy Mrs Gohar Dastqeb were unperturbed:

The previous regime used to say 'fewer children a better life'. We do not say this. . . . As the late Ayatollah Mottahari had repeatedly stated this 1,647,000 square kilometres of land in our country could feed 150 million people . . . you only have to look around there are lots of empty spaces in Sistan and Baluchestan [Eastern provinces bordering on the central desert].

(*Zaneh Rouz* 12 May 1990)

But already in 1988 the Islamic government had introduced a Bill for population control and a year later a five-year programme was announced to curb the explosion. By 1990 Ayatollah Yousef Saneyi was advocating birth control. He told the population control seminar in Isfahan that he had come to the conclusion that

None of the wise and learned people has ever said that it is good and desirable to have lots of children.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 3 February 1990)



His preferred solution was 'to tie up women's tubes and untie them whenever it's necessary'!

The population crisis posed a severe dilemma for the Islamic government. It had long since outlawed the pre-revolutionary abortion law and dismantled the family planning clinics. Suddenly it found itself with families averaging five or more children and no clear policy for halting the momentum. In July 1991 the government decreed that for a fourth birth, working women were not entitled to their three months' paid maternity leave, nor could a fourth child be allowed any rations or a ration card. Any family that chose to have a fourth child would have to share out its resources and spread it more thinly, with no help from the state. At the same time the Minister of Health Dr Reza Malekzadeh suggested to husbands that they should choose to have a vasectomy. A year later the courts decided to reconsider the abortion laws:

It remains absolutely illegal to have an abortion or to carry out an abortion. Article 91 of the Criminal code imposes the death penalty, according to the Islamic laws, for anyone murdering an unborn child 'if that child possesses a soul'. But 'before the soul enters the body of a being' if a doctor is of the opinion that it is dangerous to continue with the pregnancy and issues a certificate to that effect; then the pregnancy can be terminated.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 1 August 1992)

At the same time the newspapers published a list of fifty hospitals in the country offering free vasectomy and female sterilisation.

By 1993 the Ministry of Health had its own population control bureau, with a 20 billion rials budget that was 300 per cent higher than that of the previous year. Assisted by an additional \$300 million loan from the World Bank the bureau launched a massive population control campaign offering free services at national, provincial and rural levels. The aim was to reduce population growth to 2.7 per cent per annum (*Zaneh Rouz* 18 April 1993).

A year later academia was mobilised to provide evidence in support of population control. Dr Mohab Ali Professor and head of research on productivity and efficiency *bahrevani* of Alameh Tabatabayi University announced that

Women who have too many children would not find the time to think and work properly and have to devote themselves to cleaning and feeding the household. For a woman to have time to think properly about the education of her children and to create a suitable home environment she must have few children – ideally a maximum of two adults and two children per family – since the fewer the children the more time a mother has for each and the higher the rate of efficiency and productivity of that mother.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 4 May 1994)

Azam Taleqani seized the opportunity to point out the close links between polygamy and increasing birth rates. Before the revolution Iranian women

had managed to curb men's right to polygamy, by making remarriage subject to the consent of the first wife and ratification by Family Courts. Khomeini had restated men's right to permanent and temporary marriages and his successor Rafsanjani had endorsed this position during the war.

But women's opposition to polygamy continued. In this they were assisted by the Koranic dictum that no man, other than the Prophet of Islam, could treat all his wives equally and therefore it was advisable for them to take only one (4:3, 4:4, 4:129). As Azam Taleqani stated:

There are 500,000 fewer women than men in our country. . . . Yet we are told that we must accept that our husbands have the right to remarry. I even went to some of our religious leaders and asked them whether they were backing the family or planning to destroy it? Since it is obvious that the moment a second wife steps in, effectively the first wife is discarded and her life is ruined. . . . But they are forcing women in this country to accept polygamy, if they don't then they are told that they have to quit and divorce the husband. . . . How can you have such a policy and still claim that women are respected and valued? What is there left of such a woman? How can she become a good mother and raise a healthy family?

(*Zaneh Rouz* 25 December 1990)

Although during the war the religious institution had been largely supportive of polygamy, afterwards, with the population explosion, some of its more enlightened members conceded Taleqani's point. In February 1990 Ayatollah Yousef Saneyi asked:

Who says there are no barriers to polygamy in Islam? You should study Islamic law and then see whether you can make such a claim. The only thing that some men know about the Koran is the right to polygamy.

(*Zaneh Rouz* 3 February 1990)

As yet polygamy has not been outlawed. But the prospects of curbing it have improved. What has been a marked success is the decision in the summer of 1993 to revise the *Qassas* laws and make honour killings punishable. The newly elected women members of *Majlis*, Azam Taleqani's Women's Movement and Zahra Rahnavard, all made a concerted effort to outlaw honour killings. They documented the growing numbers of murders and atrocities committed by husbands, fathers and brothers on their unsuspecting womenfolk and demanded that the judiciary defend women. Finally the head of the judiciary Ayatollah Mohamad Yazdi issued a decree revising the laws and making male murders, be they kin or not, subject to state prosecution. He agreed to remove the requirement that made the male 'guardians' responsible for seeking justice in such cases. The decision was a landmark; it demonstrated that the *Qassas* laws, supposedly Islamic and eternal, were, like other aspects of the Islamic rule, responsive to pressure and subject to change.

## SELF-IMMOLATION

Although it is the Islamist women who have succeeded in changing some of the more repressive anti-feminist laws they have been assisted in their battle by secular women's resistance groups as well as the rising numbers of tragic self-immolations. Increasingly Iranian women are choosing to burn themselves rather than tolerate the misogynist rules concerning their private and public lives. Daughters forced into unacceptable marriages, young brides caught in difficult marriages, wives faced with their husbands' polygamous marriages, and more recently women barred from employment for failing to observe the Islamic dress code.

A tragic example was Professor Homa Darabi Tehrani, who set herself on fire to protest against the draconian misogynist rule of the Islamic government; she died as she had lived, campaigning for liberty. On 21 February 1994, Darabi tore off her headscarf and her Islamic long coat in a public thoroughfare near Tajrish Square in the Shemiran suburb of Tehran. She gave an impassioned speech against the government's oppressive measures which disempower and undermine women; calling for liberty and equality she poured petrol on herself and set herself alight. Homa Darabi, a popular teacher and respected researcher, had been dismissed from her post as Professor of Psychology in Tehran University for 'non-adherence to Islamic conduct and dress code' in December 1991. Although in May 1993 the decision was overturned by the 'Employment and Grievance Tribunal' the university refused to reinstate her.

Her death led to widespread protests in Iran and abroad. An estimated thirty thousand people attended her memorial service on 24 February 1994, at the Aljavad Mosque in Tehran. The meeting was held despite the government's intention to ban it. A letter of condemnation signed by about seventy leading Iranian academics working in the West was sent to the government in Tehran and activists abroad organised well-attended protest meetings in her memory in London, Paris, Los Angeles and other cities in the USA and Canada. They have also been writing letters condemning the denial of human rights to Iranian women.

## CONCLUSION

The rule of Islam in Iran has not been easy on women. They lost much of the ground that they had won over the previous century and the way to recapturing some of those rights has been slow and barred by prejudice and patriarchal power. Undaunted Iranian women have struggled on. Some have actively opposed the Islamic dress codes and put their own lives on the line in support of their principles. Others have for the moment conceded the veil and its imposition in the name of Islam, though they have done so reluctantly and have continued the discussions about its validity, relevance and the extent to which it should be imposed. But the bargain that they have struck (Kandiyoti

1988) has enabled them to negotiate better terms. They have managed to revert the discriminatory policies on education, they are vociferously attacking the inequalities in the labour market and demanding better care and welfare provisions for working mothers. Of course in this, as in all other issues concerning women, the demise of Khomeini was in itself of the essence. Although the road to liberty is one that is strewn with difficulties, Iranian women, as ever, have come out fighting and have proved indomitable.

## NOTES

- 1 As one of many examples this statement was made by a woman interviewee in Algeria, for the *Today* programme (21 September 1993).
- 2 It is worth noting that some commentators such as Ghassan Salame are of the view that the 'Islam of the Islamists may be nothing but a discourse' (1994: 7-8).
- 3 Jaleh Shahriar Afshar, feminist researcher interviewed by *Zaneh Rouz* 29 August 1992.
- 4 The 1978 sample survey of childbearing women, carried out by the Statistical Centre and reported in February 1987.

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## FURTHER READING

For a thorough historic overview of women in Islam it is well worth reading Leila Ahmed's (1992) scholarly book *Women and Gender in Islam*, which provides an excellent overarching historical perspective of both the secular and the Islamist movements of Middle Eastern women, as well as providing a millennial historical view of their political engagements. Nadia Abbott's (1942) *Aishah The Beloved of Mohamad* presents an excellent analysis of the life of one of the leading women of Islam and should be read along with Fatima Mernissi's (1991) *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, which provides an in-depth analysis of the meaning and imposition of the veil in terms of both the Prophet's life and the subsequent interpretations placed on the injunction on the relatives of the Prophet of being dressed modestly.

Haleh Afshar's (1994) *Why Fundamentalism? Iranian Women and their Support for Islam* looks at the arguments presented by the female advocates of Islamism for rejecting the Western options of feminism and choosing the Islamic way for women. Amrita Chhachhi's (1991) 'Forced Identities: The State, Communalism, Fundamentalism and Women in India', in D. Kandiyoti (ed.) *Women, Islam and the State*, complements this by offering a critical analysis of why women would hark back to a golden past in order to come to terms with a bleak present.

For the Iranian case it is useful to look at Homa Omid's (1994) *Islam and the Post Revolutionary State in Iran*, which provides a historical and political framework for understanding the post-revolutionary state in Iran, and Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh's (eds) (1982) *In the Shadow of Islam*, which looks at the plight of women in the post-revolutionary state.

Haleh Afshar's (1982) 'Khomeini's Teachings and their Implications for Women', in Tabari and Yeganeh's *In the Shadow of Islam*, looks critically at the Ayatollah's specific interpretations of Islamic laws; and her (1992) 'Women and Work: Ideology not Adjustment at Work in Iran', in H. Afshar and C. Dennis (eds) *Women and Adjustment Policies in the Third World*, analyses the implications of these interpretations in terms of women's labour market participation in Iran.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini's (1993) 'Women, Marriage and the Law in Post-revolutionary Iran', in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women in the Middle East*, looks at the way in which women have used their Islamic rights to negotiate better terms for themselves in the marriage courts, while Mir-Hosseini's (1993) *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law* compares the Iranian cases with their Moroccan counterparts.