

Gender of Democracy

*The Encounter between Feminism and
Reformism in Contemporary Iran*

Parvin Paidar



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Acronyms

CEDAW	United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
NGO	non-governmental organization
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US	United States

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

This paper is a critical analysis of the encounter between feminist and reformist political thought during the first reformist presidency in the Islamic Republic of Iran (May 1997 to June 2001). It places feminism and reformism in their historical context, discusses the complex forces that have facilitated their development, and analyses the interface between these two movements. The paper is presented in three parts.

The first part, “The genesis of the gender debate”, describes the contemporary context since the revolution of 1979 and its development dynamics: the political direction of the post-revolutionary society, the gender impact of the Islamization policies of the new state, the trajectory of women’s citizenship role from “revolution” to “civil society”, the emergence of secularism and Islamism as markers within the women’s movement, and the development of the Islamist democratization and feminist movements. In this part, the author concludes that women played a key role in keeping alive the spirit of resistance against the suppression of democracy and human rights during the politically harsh decade of the 1980s. In the 1990s, they continued to play an important citizenship role in bringing about the first elected Islamist reformist government in Iran. Since then, women have faced the challenge of creating a feminist space within a democratization movement that tends to marginalize gender issues and the women’s movement.

The second part of the paper, “The gender boundaries of reformism”, focuses on the conceptual development of the reformist movement and its gender implications. It presents and analyses the views of the key Islamist reformist strands: “dynamic jurisprudence”, “religious intellectuals” and the “coalition for political development”. The potential of these reformist views for the development of the gender debate is discussed, and their limitations identified. Here, the author concludes that these reformist strands have made an important conceptual contribution by opening up the political space for Islamist gender theory in a way that had not been possible before. At the same time, Islamist reformism has displayed serious political weaknesses on gender issues. According to the author, Islamist feminism has begun to challenge these weaknesses effectively. Although yet to be recognized by reformists, Islamist feminists have transformed reformist theories by taking forward their gender potential and bridging the gaps within and between them. Feminist intervention has taken many forms, the most substantial ones being the bridging the gap between jurisprudence and theology and engendering democracy.

Part three, “The dawn of feminism”, focuses on the characteristics and internal debates of the feminist movement itself. The positions of the two broad categories of secularist feminism and Islamist feminism are presented, and the emergence of a third category—pragmatic feminism—discussed. The historical rift between the Islamist and secularist women’s movements, rooted in the lack of trust and solidarity between the two movements since the Revolution, has manifested itself in passionate political debates over the compatibility of Islam and feminism,

and the universality of women's rights. These debates have proved both testing and healing for contemporary Iranian feminism. Testing, because they have brought into the open the underlying culture of lack of tolerance of difference, and resulted in peer pressure against collaborative feminist politics. Healing, because they have made both Islamist and secularist feminists face difficult issues and seek firm grounds upon which to base future collaboration.

Although the goal of feminist solidarity has so far eluded the Iranian feminist movement, like many other feminist movements in the world, one can point to a new beginning in the form of women taking collective action under particular sets of conditions and circumstances, and over specific rallying issues. In her conclusion, Paidar argues that these examples are important in the context of Iran, where a particularly vicious attack has been waged on almost all aspects of women's lives for the past two decades, and where the only tangible internal opposition is Islamist based. In today's Iran the political choices open to both secularist and Islamist feminists are limited and unsatisfactory. Nonetheless, feminists of both persuasions must make a choice between withdrawal and engagement. If engagement is the answer, then collaborative efforts between Islamists and secularists over specific issues are inevitable.

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Résumé

Cet exposé présente une analyse critique de la rencontre entre la réflexion politique féministe et réformiste durant la première présidence réformiste de la République islamique d'Iran (mai 1997 à juin 2001). Elle place féminisme et réformisme dans leur contexte historique, débat des forces complexes qui ont facilité leur développement et analyse les liens entre ces deux mouvements. L'exposé est présenté en trois parties.

La première partie, "la genèse du débat relatif à la sexospécificité", décrit le contexte actuel depuis la révolution de 1979, ainsi que sa dynamique de développement: la direction politique de la société post-révolutionnaire, l'effet sur les rapports hommes-femmes des politiques d'islamisation du nouvel État, la trajectoire du rôle des femmes en tant que citoyennes depuis la "révolution" jusqu'à la "société civile", l'émergence du laïcisme et de l'islamisme en tant que repères au sein du mouvement des femmes, et le développement de la démocratisation islamiste et des mouvements féministes. Dans cette partie, l'auteur conclut que les femmes ont joué un rôle clef pour garder vivant l'esprit de la résistance contre la suppression de la démocratie et des droits de l'homme durant la période difficile sur le plan politique qu'ont été les années 80. Durant les années 1990, elles ont continué de jouer un rôle important de citoyennes, en hissant au pouvoir le premier gouvernement islamiste réformiste élu en Iran. Depuis, les femmes ont relevé le défi de créer un espace féministe au sein du mouvement de

démocratisation qui a tendance à marginaliser les questions de sexospécificité et le mouvement des femmes.

La deuxième partie de l'exposé, "les frontières du réformisme par rapport à la sexospécificité" se concentre sur le développement conceptuel du mouvement réformiste ainsi que sur ses implications sur le plan des rapports hommes-femmes. Elle présente et analyse les opinions des principaux courants réformistes islamistes: "jurisprudence dynamique", "intellectuels religieux" et "coalition pour le développement politique". Elle évalue le potentiel de ces opinions réformistes pour le développement du débat sur la sexospécificité et identifie leurs limites. L'auteur conclut ici que ces courants réformistes ont apporté une contribution théorique importante en libérant un espace politique pour la conception islamiste des rapports hommes-femmes d'une manière qui n'avait pas été possible auparavant. Dans le même temps, le réformisme islamiste a manifesté de sérieuses faiblesses politiques pour ce qui est des questions de sexospécificité. Selon l'auteur, le féminisme islamiste s'est mis à remettre ces faiblesses en question de manière efficace. Bien qu'elles ne soient pas jusqu'à présent reconnues par les réformistes, les féministes islamistes ont transformé les théories réformistes en développant leur potentiel sur le plan des rapports hommes-femmes et en colmatant les brèches qui pouvaient exister entre comme à l'intérieur de ces théories. L'intervention féministe a revêtu des formes multiples, les plus substantielles étant le fait de combler le fossé entre jurisprudence et théologie et d'engendrer la démocratie.

La troisième partie, "l'aube du féminisme", se concentre sur les caractéristiques et les débats internes du mouvement féministe lui-même. Les positions des deux grandes catégories de féminisme laïque et islamiste sont présentées, et l'apparition d'une troisième catégorie, le féminisme pragmatique, est évoquée. Le fossé historique entre les mouvements féminins islamiste et laïque, né de l'absence de confiance et de solidarité entre les deux mouvements depuis la Révolution, s'est manifesté sous forme de débats politiques enflammés à propos de la compatibilité entre l'islam et le féminisme, ainsi que de l'universalité des droits des femmes. Ces débats se sont avérés à la fois éprouvants et apaisants pour le féminisme iranien contemporain. Éprouvants, car ils ont fait éclater au grand jour la culture latente d'intolérance envers la différence, débouchant sur une pression exercée par l'entourage contre la politique collective féministe. Apaisants, car ils ont obligé les féministes tant islamistes que laïques à appréhender des questions difficiles et à chercher un terrain d'entente solide sur lequel bâtir une collaboration future.

Bien que l'objectif de la solidarité féministe ait été jusqu'à présent hors de portée du mouvement féministe iranien, comme d'autres mouvements féministes dans le monde, un nouveau départ se dessine sous la forme d'une action collective entreprise par des femmes sous certaines conditions, dans certaines circonstances et autour de points de ralliement précis. Dans sa conclusion, Parvin Paidar fait valoir que ces exemples sont importants dans le contexte de l'Iran où une attaque particulièrement virulente a été lancée depuis vingt ans contre pratiquement tous les aspects de la vie des femmes, et où la seule opposition interne tangible est fondée sur l'islamisme. Dans l'Iran d'aujourd'hui, les choix politiques qui s'offrent tant aux

féministes laïques qu'islamistes sont restreints et peu satisfaisants. Néanmoins, les féministes des deux obédiences doivent opérer un choix entre retrait et engagement. Si l'engagement est la réponse, des efforts conjoints entre islamistes et laïques sur certaines questions spécifiques seront inévitables.

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Resumen

En estas páginas se lleva a cabo un estudio crítico del encuentro entre el pensamiento político feminista y reformista durante la primera presidencia reformista de la República Islámica del Irán (de mayo de 1997 a junio de 2001). El feminismo y el reformismo se abordan en su contexto histórico, así como los complejos factores que han contribuido a su desarrollo, y se analizan los puntos de conexión entre ambos movimientos. El documento consta de tres partes.

En la primera parte, "El origen del debate sobre la distinción por género", se describe el contexto actual desde la revolución de 1979 y su dinámica evolutiva: la dirección política de la sociedad posrevolucionaria, el impacto en la distinción por género de las políticas de islamización del nuevo Estado, la evolución del papel de ciudadanía de las mujeres, desde la "revolución" hasta la "sociedad civil", el surgimiento del secularismo y el islamismo como indicadores en el movimiento de las mujeres, y el desarrollo de la democratización islamista y los movimientos feministas. En esta parte, la autora concluye que las mujeres desempeñaron un papel fundamental para mantener vivo el espíritu de la resistencia contra la represión de la democracia y los derechos humanos durante el difícil decenio político de 1980. En el decenio de 1990 siguieron desempeñando una importante función de ciudadanía, al provocar la elección del primer gobierno reformista islamista en Irán. Desde entonces, las mujeres se han enfrentado al desafío de reservar un espacio al feminismo en un movimiento de democratización que tiende a excluir tanto las cuestiones relativas a la distinción por género como el movimiento de las mujeres.

La segunda parte del documento, "Los límites del reformismo relativos a la distinción por género", se centra en el desarrollo conceptual del movimiento reformista y en sus consecuencias en la distinción por género. Se exponen y analizan las opiniones de las principales tendencias de la reforma islamista: la "jurisprudencia dinámica", los "intelectuales religiosos" y la "coalición para el desarrollo político". Se estudian las posibilidades de que estas opiniones reformistas impulsen el debate en torno a la distinción por género, y se identifican sus limitaciones. La autora concluye al respecto que estas tendencias reformistas han contribuido considerablemente en la esfera conceptual, al reservar un espacio político a la teoría islamista de la distinción por género de un modo impensable hasta el momento. Al mismo tiempo, el reformismo islamista ha

mostrado defectos políticos en lo que respecta a la distinción por género. Según la autora, el feminismo islamista ha comenzado a desafiar eficientemente estos puntos negativos. Aunque aún debe contar con el reconocimiento de los reformistas, las feministas islamistas han transformado las teorías islamistas defendiendo las posibilidades de la distinción entre los sexos y reduciendo la brecha entre ambos. La intervención feminista ha tomado muchas formas, entre las que destacan la reducción de la brecha existente entre la jurisprudencia y la teología, y la democracia emergente.

La tercera parte, “El alba del feminismo”, se centra en las características y debates internos del movimiento feminista propiamente dicho. Se presentan las posiciones de las dos amplias categorías del feminismo, el feminismo secularista y el feminismo islamista, y aborda el surgimiento de una tercera categoría, el feminismo pragmático. La división histórica entre los movimientos islamista y secularista de las mujeres, debido a la falta de confianza y solidaridad entre ambos movimientos desde la Revolución, se ha manifestado en debates políticos apasionados sobre la compatibilidad del Islam y el feminismo, y la universalidad de los derechos de las mujeres. Estos debates han demostrado ser tanto una prueba como una cura para el feminismo contemporáneo en Irán. Una prueba, porque han denunciado la cultura subyacente a la intolerancia de las diferencias, y se han traducido en una presión de grupo contra la política feminista colectiva. Una cura, porque han logrado que las feministas tanto islamistas como secularistas se enfrenten a problemas difíciles y se esfuercen por buscar fundamentos sólidos para su colaboración en el futuro.

Aunque el objetivo de la solidaridad feminista ha evitado hasta ahora el movimiento feminista iraní, como muchos otros movimientos feministas en el mundo, puede hablarse de un nuevo principio, que se manifiesta en la acción colectiva de las mujeres en unas condiciones y circunstancias particulares, y en lo que respecta a cuestiones específicas de coordinación. Paidar defiende en su conclusión la importancia que revisten estos ejemplos en el contexto de Irán, donde se han atacado ferozmente casi todos los aspectos de las vidas de las mujeres en los últimos dos decenios y donde la única oposición interna evidente es islamista. Actualmente, las opciones políticas que permanecen abiertas en Irán tanto para feministas secularistas como islamistas son limitadas y deficientes. No obstante, ambos movimientos feministas deben elegir entre el abandono o el compromiso. Si deciden comprometerse, las feministas islamistas y secularistas emprenderán inevitablemente acciones colectivas respecto a cuestiones específicas.

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Introduction¹

This paper is a critical analysis of the encounter between feminist and reformist political thought during the first reformist presidency in the Islamic Republic of Iran (May 1997 to June 2001).² Since the election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in May 1997, the reformist movement in Iran has gained prominence, and his election has become a marker in the current coverage of events in Iran in both the international press and the Iranian studies field. In an important sense, that election did mark a new setting for transformative politics and civil society in Iran. However, this can be justifiably regarded as a gender-blind historical marker if one takes into account the profound changes that had been happening in Iranian society since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the role of women as agents of change.

This paper places feminism and reformism in their historical context, discusses the complex forces that have facilitated their development, and analyses the interface between the two movements. It is presented in three sections. The first, The Genesis of the Gender Debate, describes the contemporary context since the revolution of 1979 and its development dynamics: the political direction of the post-revolutionary society, the impact of the Islamization policies, the relationship between political organizations and the women's movement, the emergence of secularism and Islamism as markers within the women's movement, the development of Islamist reformism and feminism, the response of women and young people to social suppression, the reconstruction of the women's movement, women's citizenship role and challenges, the rise of the civil society movement and the challenge of reformism. The second section, The Gender Boundaries of Reformism, focuses on the conceptual development of the reformist movement. It presents and analyses the views of the key Islamist reformist strands: the "dynamic jurisprudence", the "religious intellectuals" and the "coalition for political development". The potentials of these reformist views for the development of the gender debate are discussed and their limitations identified. This is followed by a discussion of the feminist contribution to Islamist reformism. The third section, The Dawn of Pragmatic Feminism, focuses on the characteristics and internal debates of the feminist movement itself. The positions of the two broad categories—secularist and Islamist feminism—are presented; and the emergence of a third category—pragmatic feminism—is discussed.

Many of the terms and dichotomies used in this paper require definition, and they are addressed herein. However, it is important to clarify at the outset what the two terms, "reformism" and "feminism", convey in the current Iranian context. Reformism (*eslahtalabi*), reformists (*eslahtalaban*) and the reformist movement (*jonbeshe eslahtalabi*) are often used interchangeably with the civil society movement or the democratization movement. These terms refer to the oppositional movement inside Iran (comprised of Islamic and secular

¹ This paper is based on joint preparation with Afsaneh Najmabadi for the UNRISD workshop on Gender Justice, Development and Rights: Substantiating Rights in a Disabling Environment (New York, 3 June 2000). I would like to dedicate it to Afsaneh Najmabadi in appreciation for her tremendous support with thinking it through and accessing reference material. Elahe Rostami-Povey (Maryam Poya) also assisted me with reference material, for which I am thankful. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable editorial comments from Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi.

² This paper was completed before the Iranian presidential election of June 2001 and does not take its result into consideration.

followers) led by moderate Islamists against the reign of the hardline Islamists. This movement came to prominence with the election of President Khatami after almost a decade of clandestine existence. The characteristics of the reformist movement are discussed throughout the paper, particularly in the second section.

Contrary to reformism, the term “feminism” does not have a Farsi (Persian) equivalent and is widely used as a Western import into Farsi. In the context of Iran, the definition conveyed by feminism depends on the sympathy of the user, and there is even substantial diversity in the meaning given to the term by its sympathizers. But the most common messages conveyed are those of support for “women’s equal rights” and opposition to “patriarchy”. The terms “women’s movement” and “feminism” are widely used in this paper.³ The main reason for this is that in no other historical period in Iran have women’s issues had a higher political profile and displayed higher potential for the mobilization of women—albeit around varied and sometimes contradictory agenda. Indeed, the absence of some of the characteristics of well-known women’s movements in the twentieth century (such as clear leadership and an agreed political agenda) is only due to political repression. Furthermore, despite the fact that many Islamist women leaders have only recently begun to refer to themselves publicly as feminists and that it is still common among women to reject feminism for various reasons, in no other historical period has feminism been accepted by so many Iranian women (inside and outside the country) as part of their identity. The characteristics of the feminist movement will be discussed throughout the paper, particularly in the third section.

I. The Genesis of the Gender Debate

The contemporary genealogies of the women’s rights and reformist movements in Iran should be sought in the Revolution of 1979, which had a number of distinguishing features. It might be useful to start with a brief background to the Revolution for the benefit of the readers who are new to the field of Iranian studies.⁴

The Iranian Revolution that overthrew the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty (which started in 1925 with Reza Shah Pahlavi and ended in 1979 with the downfall of his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi—hereafter the Shah). The Pahlavi Shahs followed an autocratic and Western-oriented modernization approach, which was heavily supported by the United States and other Western countries. They violated the principles of the constitutional monarchy that had been established as a result of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, and faced nationalist and socialist opposition throughout their rule for doing so. The Iranian opposition became increasingly “culturalist” and “Islamist” during the late 1960s and 1970s, which led to the transformation of Shiism, the official branch of Islam in Iran, from a force portrayed as traditional by the Pahlavi

³ See Razavi (2000) and Molyneux (1998 and 2000) for an overview of the debates on women’s movements in the international context and trends affecting them in democratization processes.

⁴ The historical context is based on my previous works as listed in the bibliography, in particular Paidar (1995; 1993a; 1984 and 1982).

regime into a modern revolutionary political force. The motor driving this transformation was the dual force of populism and anti-Westernism.

A bare bone background to the political developments in Iran since the Revolution of February 1979 can be presented as follows. The Revolution was seen by the majority of its participants to be about “Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic”, as reflected in the infamous revolutionary slogan. Since then, politics in Iran has been in a state of crisis due to the ever-present tension between the three components of the slogan: the “independence” component (anti-Americanism) has been latched on to by the theocratic state that forced itself into power after the Revolution, the “freedom” component (democracy) has been emphasized by dissidents and reformists, and the “Islamic Republic” component has given rise to competing interpretations about the characteristics and role of an Islamic state. Women have been visibly active in all of these components and the women’s movement has managed to create a distinct political space for itself. Iranian feminism has become deeply divided and mature at the same time, as a result of the hard experiences of the past 22 years.

The breakdown of revolutionary consensus

Two of the most salient features of the Revolution were the mass participation of men and women of all classes and categories, and the alliance of a wide range of political forces (different shades of nationalists, socialists and Islamists) against the Pahlavi rule and the US influence in Iran. The revolutionary context presented an interesting snapshot of the relationship between women’s groups and political organizations. During the Revolution the consensus on gender (to which most nationalist, socialists and Islamist forces subscribed) emphasized an “authentic” Iranian/Islamic national gender identity as opposed to what was regarded to be the “Westernized” gender identity promoted in the Pahlavi era. This consensus broke down during the post-revolutionary transitional period of 1979–1981 as a result of the struggle for state power between the revolutionary forces, which led to a process of elimination of most members of the anti-Pahlavi, anti-American alliance from the political scene inside Iran. The hardline Islamist camp, led by the most powerful leader within the alliance, Ayatollah Khomeini, gradually gained the upper hand through various tactics, including a rapid Islamization policy. Ayatollah Khomeini strongly believed that gender relation was the key to social change. He was determined to use the profound political change that had been achieved by the Revolution to the advantage of the hardline Islamist camp through the imposition of a strict Islamic gender relation. This included “Islamic” appearance, behaviour and position for men and women. But, since in his scheme of thought women were regarded as signifiers of national identity, their appearance, behaviour and position first had to be Islamized. Within a few months of the victory of the Revolution, most aspects of women’s position had been subjected to intervention by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The hasty Islamization of women’s position confronted the political parties with the choice between entering the battlefield of gender and preserving political unity in the face of the perceived “counter-revolutionary” threat from the West. Most political parties of the secular and Islamist left and centre, which were being elbowed out from the political scene by the Islamist hardliners, chose political unity over supporting women against forced Islamization.

The first and foremost opposition to Islamization came from the socialist and other secular women's organizations and individuals who organized numerous demonstrations and protests that drew sizeable support mainly (but not exclusively) from middle class women. But the momentum was lost as a result of lack of support by the political parties. The Islamist hardliners managed to stop women's public protests by sponsoring counter demonstrations by their own women supporters and organizing mob attacks on the demonstrators. Women's appeals to secularist political parties for support and protection of their right to public protest were futile (Moghissi, 1996).

Two years on from the Revolution, major reversals had taken place on gender relations in Iran. The context of revolutionary populism, anti-Americanism and internal power struggle constituted the cornerstone of the Islamization policies of the state in all fronts, and the determinants of which concepts and policies on women were defined as Islamic and which were regarded as un-Islamic. Sexual segregation outside the home and the use of women's *hejab*⁵ were both in full implementation. If women had to have a presence outside the home it had to be desexualized to protect the Islamic nation from corruption. Women were barred from becoming judges or president; they could not study and work in certain fields (such as construction or mining), travel, or enter into education and employment without the consent of either father or husband. They lost their protection against polygamy and the right they had gained in the mid-1970s (through the Family Protection Law) to initiate divorce, get custody of their children and choose abortion for social reasons. With the revoking of the Civil Code of 1936—which was established by Reza Shah based on the traditional Shii jurisprudence (*feqh*) and replaced by the Shah in the 1970s with a more progressive Family Planning Law—as the main family law of the Islamic Republic, the supremacy of men over women within the sphere of family was legalized once more. This was reinforced by anti-adultery policies of the state, which established male supremacy outside the home. The Bureau for Combating Corruption (the morality police) was set up to cleanse the society from the manifestations of “Westernized” gender relations and put an end to “free relationships” between men and women. Homosexuality and sexual relations outside marriage were pronounced public offences punishable by stoning to death, which created a horrifying atmosphere of state and domestic violence against women.

The process of consolidation of the Islamic Republic into an Islamic theocracy was further facilitated by driving the secular political organizations and women's rights movement into exile. These groups resumed activity among the sizeable Iranian communities that had taken to exile in Europe and North America after the Revolution. But the eradication of the opposition inside Iran did not end with the secular and Islamist left. Soon the moderate parties who had shared executive power during the transitional period, as the Provisional Government, were targeted. These were liberal and cultural nationalists who ascribed to moderate reformist and Islamist viewpoints. They had been opposed to hasty and forceful Islamization, but had not

⁵ In the Islamic Republic of Iran, *hejab* consists of a scarf, a loose and long overcoat, with trousers and thick socks underneath, but some women put on the more strict optional form—a thick head-to-toe veil that only leaves the hands and parts of the face visible. The hardline clerics have pushed for the strict version to become the norm for women working in government offices, but have not succeeded.

dared to contradict the edicts of Ayatollah Khomeini, and therefore ended up justifying it. They were also under attack from most of the left, which had found itself in alliance with the Islamist hardliners on anti-Americanism. This contributed to the weakening of moderate politics during the transitional period. Eventually the hardliners managed to deprive the moderates of state power by replacing nationalism with Islam as the main mobilizing force.

The exclusion of the moderates from political power continued throughout the 1980s. The next group to be alienated was the Islamist intellectuals-turned-technocrats, who played an important role in consolidating the hardliners' power in the early post-Revolutionary years. But the excessive anti-Western and pro-Islamization zeal of the hardliners managed to alienate them too. They gradually left their official positions and took up intellectual pursuits, taking forward the Islamist debate on the nature of Islamic society behind the scenes. They produced dissident political and intellectual leaders, such as Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (the current President), Abdolkarim Soroush (a professor of Islamic philosophy) and many others, who with inspiration from the founding fathers of Shii reformism in twentieth century Iran (such as Mehdi Bazargan, Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Motahhari) laid the ground for a new reformist movement that aimed to empower the civil society. These dissidents emerged in the mid-1990s, when the conditions were ripe, to haunt the hardline Islamists.

Women and young people as agents of change

Since there was no opposition to speak out, women and young people found themselves carrying the mantle of the opposition. With women taking the main brunt of the state suppression and 65 per cent of the population being under 25, this is not surprising. Women and young people took up spontaneous individual action to protect their identity against the onslaught of Islamization. A spontaneous "movement" of civil resistance and disobedience against the morality police developed. During the first decade of the Islamic Republic, which can be regarded as the most politically and socially repressive period in the twentieth century Iran, secular middle class women demonstrated their objection to forced *hejab* on a daily basis and irritated the authorities over the colour, size and shape of their *hejab* to no end. Secular middle class youth in Western fashion outfits fought daily battles on the street with the anti-corruption police. The subjugation of women and youth became the main preoccupation of the authorities, who every now and then gave up their street battles with half-covered women and young men mixing in public, but resumed them when they went too far.

Such scenes were by no means confined to the capital and were reported from most cities. Reports also spread about incidents of bystanders beating off the anti-corruption police who tried to arrest women for not wearing proper *hejab*, or people warning young people in public places about the presence of the police in the area, and so on. Another important form of spontaneous protest in the 1980s and 1990s was the publicity generated by Islamist women's magazines and women parliamentarians about gender-based injustice against women from social categories that provided grassroots support to the Islamic Republic. The stories of war widows whose children were being forcefully taken away from them by the paternal guardian were particularly effective. Where there was no possibility of oppositional collective action on gender or any other ground, such publicity helped to soften the state's gender policies to a

certain extent and nurtured a collective consciousness among women.⁶ These examples of resistance were backed up and supported by the Iranian communities in exile in the West through persistent publicizing of the plight of women, minorities and other suppressed groups at international fora. Eventually the quiet protest of women found formal expression through the ballot box and led to the impressive election victory of President Khatami on a reformist ticket.

Women's movement reconstructed

The combined effects of women's mass participation in the Revolution, their continued presence on the social scene of the post-revolutionary society (to be elaborated on later), the forced Islamization, and the failure of the moderate Islamist and secular forces to forge alliance with women's organizations to safeguard women's rights, resulted in the reconstruction of the women's movement (Paidar, 1995).

Female collective action took many forms during and after the Revolution of 1979. These can be put into three main categories: directed, associational and independent collective action (Molyneux, 1998). Under the *directed* category, where initiative and authority came from outside the collective, women's mobilization took place through political organizations and civil society institutions such as the mosques and professional associations. This was the largest and most effective form of collective action during the Revolution, with a mass incorporation of women with Islamic, nationalist or socialist sympathies. The collective itself and its agenda were diverse, but the common ground was women's action to achieve the common goal of overthrowing the Shah and ridding Iran of US influence. However, since gender was a core revolutionary issue, the common goal was based on gender demands and the commitment by all political organizations to "restore women's true rights and dignity", which they believed had been lost due to the Westernized style of Pahlavi modernization. Therefore, this form of directed collective action did manage to mobilise women on the grounds of gender and raise gender awareness among women participants even if, for some participants, it was for conservative reasons.

Under the category of *associational* activism, where independent women's organizations form alliances with political organizations on specific issues, the closest that can be found in the context of the Iranian revolution is the socialist and secular nationalist women's organizations and their relationship with their parent organizations. However, as noted earlier, the unequal power relation between the parent organization and their women's wings worked to the disadvantage of women. Many secular and Islamist parties considered the protest against forced Islamization to be a "bourgeois" or "imperialist" concern and asked their women followers to preserve the political unity until the goal was reached—the goal being either

⁶ The women's newspapers, magazines and periodicals that have played an important role in raising awareness inside and outside the country about women's rights and sufferings in the Islamic Republic include: **Farzaneh** (editor Mahbubeh Abasgholizadeh), **Hoghugh Zanan** (editor Ashraf Geramizadegan), **Jens Dovom** (editor Nooshin Ahmady-Khorasany), **Nashriyeh Bonyad Pazhuhashhaye Zanan Irani** (editor Goli Amin), **Nimeye Digar**, 1983–2000 (editor Afsaneh Najmabadi), **Payam Hajar** (editor Azam Taleghani), **Zan** (editor Faeze Rafsanjani), **Zan Ruz** (various editors); and **Zanan** (editor Shahla Sherkat). On the **Zan** newspaper, see Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1999). On the **Farzaneh** periodical, see Abasgholizadeh (2000).

socialism, ideal Islamic society, independence, freedom or democracy. They promised women that social justice and equality would follow after the attainment of the goal. The women's sections of these political organizations felt betrayed by the postponement of the women's agenda and accused their organizations of paying lip service to women's rights, but refusing to put up active resistance to forced Islamization. This resulted in many women breaking away from political parties. The position taken by the left as well as by the moderate Islamist and secular nationalist parties, which turned out to be rather homogenous despite the heterogeneity of their politics, became the subject of debate and recrimination for many years (Moghissi, 1996).

Under *independent* collective action, one can mention a small network of independent women's groups and feminists who followed Islamist or secularist tendencies of a liberal, social democratic or socialist nature. Regarding the independent Islamist women activists, who labelled themselves feminists in later years, many of them started as part of the broader Islamist women's movement during the Revolution with the strong endorsement of Ayatollah Khomeini. But they broke ranks with the "official" women's organizations and acted independently when the authoritarian potential of these organizations became apparent. During the Revolution and early post-revolutionary years, many of these women supported the moderate Islamist politics of the Provisional Government and faced the same dilemma about Ayatollah Khomeini's forced Islamization. In private, they had no hesitation in opposing the forceful imposition of *hejab* as much as they opposed the forceful unveiling of the Reza Shah era on the basis of equality and choice arguments. In public, however, they put forward alternative points of view to that of the state without directly opposing its rapid Islamization policy. Despite their sympathy with the secular women's protests against compulsory *hejab*, they refused to associate themselves with the secular movement for political reasons. This created a serious rift between the two types of feminisms that has persisted to this day (see section III). As for independent secularist women, many became disillusioned and turned to independent women's activism and feminism inside and outside Iran (Moghissi, 1996). The current secularist women's movement in exile in Europe and North America—which will be discussed in detail later—has its roots in associational and independent activism.

The above description of female collective action has to be based on the understanding that the categories mentioned are flexible and that many women and women's groups have moved from one to the other. It must also be understood that, despite the conceptual diversity and physical division of women's collective action inside and outside Iran, it is possible to refer to the women's movement(s) in Iran. As emphasized earlier, the absence of some of the characteristics of well-known women's movements in the twentieth century (such as clear leadership and agreed political agenda) is only due to political repression. Women's issues have always had a high profile in Iran and gender relations have been the cornerstone of modernization and Islamization in Iran throughout the twentieth century (Paidar, 1995). However, in no other historical period as in the Islamic Republic has there been such a potential for women leaders, both Islamist and secularist, to assume leadership positions and mobilise masses of women, albeit around varied and sometimes contradictory gender demands. It is an

irony that the Islamic Republic has led to feminism being accepted by so many Iranian women (inside and outside the country) as part of their identity despite the strong opposition to this term expressed by the conservative majority and the official discourses of Islamists and secularists.

It is also important to emphasize that most of the strands within the current women's movements in Iran have their roots in the directed mobilization of the Revolutionary era. From this starting point, many of the original supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini developed their gender perspective or changed allegiance within or beyond their Islamist framework. These women revolutionaries moved on in the post-revolutionary society to fight the war with Iraq and demanded their rightful place in the post-war society. They formed welfare NGOs, human rights networks (such as the wives of imprisoned reformists); became technocrats, representatives and philanthropists, filling the state apparatus and welfare institutions of the Islamic Republic; and as feminists challenged the state's gender policies.

The challenge of women's citizenship

Although the Islamic Republic seriously undermined women's position within the family and violated their individual and human rights, it gave its female supporters the opportunity for social participation and a sense of righteousness and self-worth. The limitations imposed on and the opportunities created for women's citizenship were determined by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic and the political will of those who implemented it.

The Constitution combines Islamic theocracy with democratic accountability by assigning different degrees of power and accountability to different layers of the state pyramid. At the top of the pyramid is the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, a male cleric—who is selected by an Assembly of Experts (*majles khobregan*) comprised of high-ranking clerics and selected by the Supreme Leader—who has absolute power with accountability only to God. The Supreme Leader is the head of the armed and the security forces, controls the media, and is able to dissolve the parliament and intervene in the affairs of the executive (for example, determine the foreign policy) and the judiciary (for example, give amnesty to those convicted by courts) when he deems appropriate. The second layer of the pyramid consists of a number of constitutional and judicial bodies occupied by male clerics, selected by and accountable to the Supreme Leader. The Council of Guardians (*shoraye negahban*) is one such body in charge of approving the Islamic credentials of election candidates and judging the Islamic compatibility of the laws passed by the parliament. Various special courts (such as one that deals with dissident clerics) are other examples. Popular accountability and relative gender equality feature only in the bottom layer of the state pyramid, which consists of the executive and the legislature. The President and the members of the parliament and the local councils are elected from the candidates approved by the Council of Guardians. The office of presidency is not open to women, but women can elect and be elected for the parliament and local councils.

Despite the limited nature of democracy and democratic rights offered by the Constitution, women have managed to use all available opportunities to exercise their citizenship rights.⁷ The central role of the clergy with no accountability to citizens, upheld in the Constitution, was made possible by the mass support of men and women in a referendum on the Constitution. Therefore women's social role was regarded as an essential safeguard for the survival of the regime. Women's political participation legitimized the gender policies of the state and created an image of popular support and stability internally and internationally. For these reasons the hardliners in power harnessed women's tremendous mobilization potential to the best effect. But women also participated in great numbers in protests against the unaccountable constitutional powers of the clergy for as long as it was tolerated inside the country and later in exile. Their mass support was also channelled into strengthening the democratic institutions of the Islamic Republic's Constitution and women's electoral participation was considered of prime importance to the populist image of the Islamic Republic. Later, it played an important role in shifting the balance of power in the politics of the Islamic Republic in favour of reform and change.

Another significant extension of women's citizenship role came through their involvement in the Iran-Iraq war, which raged for most of the 1980s. Ayatollah Khomeini made several rousing speeches to promote the importance of women's support in securing victory against Iraq. Women were expected to provide ideological support, recruited as revolutionary guards and trained for military action against the enemy. Their participation in the war and its unintended consequences remains under-researched. But, from reports published in Islamist women's magazines in the 1980s⁸ and from anecdotal reports, it seems fairly clear that the scale of that participation was enormous and consciousness-transforming. The war took an enormous toll on human life and left many widowed women with children behind. It also left a huge number of young men disabled for life. That meant, when the war was over, women were not pushed back home as much as they were in the United States and Western Europe after the Second World War. On the contrary, they were redeployed in reconstruction projects and many had to be given jobs to support their families.

Another impressive achievement of women at the grassroots level has been their participation in education. Female literacy, which was 35.6 per cent in 1976, rose to 80 per cent in 1999 (and for rural women from 17.4 per cent to 62.4 per cent). The ratio of female to male students in secondary education rose from 66 per cent in 1976 to 90 per cent in 1999; and in 2000 almost 60 per cent of students enrolled in university were women. However, the employment record for women has remained dismal, with their share of total employment being 14.3 per cent in 1999. But this is partly due to the absence of appropriate mechanisms for accurate assessment of women's economic contribution at rural and urban levels (Rostami-Povey, 1999).

Women's mass participation in politics and education can be considered the most significant citizenship role that they have played in the Islamic Republic. This was made possible by

⁷ To place women's citizenship role in Iran in the international context, see Razavi (2000).

⁸ Such as those in footnote 6.

“purifying” the public space through *hejab* and the imposition of the state’s authority over traditionalist families (Hoodfar, 1997). A lot of issues remain to be tackled in making women’s participation more meaningful and equal to that of men, but there can be no doubt about the Islamic Republic’s ability to bring out those categories of women who had remained untouched by or resistant to Pahlavi modernization. These were from a range of backgrounds, including urban and rural women from low-income groups who had been exposed to the uneven and contradictory impact of Pahlavi modernization; women who had strong religious beliefs and attended mosques; women whose family members had been subjected to human rights abuses by the Pahlavi state; women from traditionalist families who were unable or unwilling to assume a public role in a society that was moving toward free association between the sexes; women who felt discriminated against outside the home for wearing the *hejab* (the Pahlavi state opposed women’s *hejab*); women who felt sympathy for political Islam, which was prevalent in the 1970s; and so on. The exposure of these women, who were isolated and alienated from public life during the Pahlavi era, to the outside world changed not only the women themselves, but also society and Islam.⁹

Less extensive but still impressive, in the context of the Islamic Republic, has been women’s presence in the state machinery as members of parliament and civil servants. The history of women’s collective action in twentieth-century Iran points to statist feminism playing a significant role within the women’s movements (Paidar, 1995). It also points to a tradition of women’s involvement in formal politics, as elected and selected politicians, civil servants and critics of the state. These traditions were set by the Pahlavi states, which encouraged a controlled degree of participation by women in formal politics and implemented their gender policies through the state women’s organization. The policy suited not only the state, but also women who used family and state connections as an opportunity to enter into formal politics and influence social policy. However, women’s activism before and after the Revolution was different in a significant way. While during the reign of the Pahlavis women’s activism had been scripted by the opposition, secular or Islamist, as a discredited venture at the service of the state or as foreign colonial importation, it became authenticated during the Revolution, opening new possibilities for growth of all kinds of activism, including through formal politics.

Furthermore, the gradual disillusionment of Islamist women activists in formal politics created an oppositional force within the state apparatus. The disillusionment arose from a number of factors. Islamist women realized that, far from supporting women’s high status in “true Islam”, the Islamic Republic granted second-class status to women under the influence of “traditional Islam”. They considered the failures of “traditional Islam” to be rooted in the male-dominant culture and the distorted interpretations of the Koran and Islamic laws. Furthermore, the earlier expectation of these women to receive support and recognition from the state and play a substantial role in the formulation of the state’s gender policies was not realized. Women in official positions as politicians and civil servants were given limited opportunity to enter top decision-making positions and faced tremendous difficulty in influencing positive gender

⁹ How women are changing Islam will be elaborated on in sections II and III, but for a broader discussion of this point see Paidar (1995).

policies (Mossaffa, 1996 and 2000; Kar, 1998). The Islamization policies of the state went in the opposite direction to that aspired to by these women. As far as the hardline Islamists who occupied the state machinery were concerned, there was no need for free debate on women's issues and no place for an independent women's movement to promote it.

Women's presence in formal politics took a turn for the worse immediately after the Revolution, as many secular women were purged from the state and the first post-revolutionary government, the Provisional Government, did not have a woman member. But in later years, women with secular disposition were replaced in the state apparatuses by women with Islamic disposition. In the Islamic Republic, women did not make it to the cabinet table until recently when President Khatami appointed Masumeh Ebtekar as the Vice President on environment and women's issues, and Zahra Shojai as his advisor and the head of his co-ordination body on women, the Centre for Women's Participation (Markaz Mosharekat Zanan), which is part of the President's office and the director of which is a cabinet member. The status of this body is above that of government departments as it is situated within the President's office and its director is a cabinet member. Women's role as civil servants and politicians, their power relations with male colleagues, and the strategies that they have adopted in pushing the gender agenda forward are under-researched areas. But the existing evidence points to a tremendous amount of male resistance and ignorance within the state machinery toward gender issues. This has been particularly problematic since the election of President Khatami in that the reformist government has had to respond to the dual pressures of women's expectations and the international demands on gender. As to international pressure, although the only international convention on women's rights that the Islamic Republic has acceded to is the 1996 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (with two reservations), nevertheless the state has been under international pressure to defend its record on women's rights—particularly since the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Tohidi, 2001).

In the past four years, President Khatami's government has responded to these pressures by engendering the state structure in ways that do not challenge the dominant and politically charged policy of segregation. The "institutional approach to women's advancement" has included the establishment of separate women's units in almost all government departments and executive agencies. All three branches of the judiciary, the legislature and the executive now have special institutions to advise them on women's issues (UNDP, 1999). This approach arises from Khatami's belief that "the Islamic system and community should confidently appoint women to sensitive posts ... Limitations should not come in the way of broad participation by women in management, politics and society" (UNICEF, 1998:19). The approach of establishing separate women's units comes from his belief that "women should also try to put their full weight behind their demands, presenting and specifying their requests, finally molding them as law" (UNICEF, 1998:19). According to Zahra Shojai¹⁰, in the plan for the decentralization of provincial governance, a 12-member committee of women has been envisaged for each province, which has added a total of 336 women to current ones in government decision-making levels.

¹⁰ In a conversation with the author.

Women have filled the state's women's units and embraced the international links.¹¹ The refusal of the High Council of the Cultural Revolution, which is dominated by the hardliners, to sign up to CEDAW has created heated debate among the hardliner and reformist factions of the state. Reformist women of both Rafsanjani (president for the previous eight years) and Khatami eras have strongly argued for acceding and, meanwhile, developed indicators and other planning and monitoring tools for measuring women's advancement in Iran against CEDAW (Habibi and Beladi-Musavi, 1998). The process of engagement with CEDAW has proved an empowering one for reformist women within the state who are now heavily into the development terminology.¹² The learning in Beijing and the contacts maintained among women since Beijing have inspired many of the state policy intentions, for example the package of measures to prevent violence against women, which is under consideration. This includes establishing police stations staffed by women, creating a national committee for the elimination of violence against women and schemes for prevention of spousal abuse (UNDP, 1999).

As to women's parliamentary presence in the Islamic Republic, it has gone down substantially since the Revolution. The comparison of the number of women members of parliament before and after the Revolution shows that, compared to the total number of members of parliament, women's share was reduced from 7 per cent during 1976–1979 (the last parliament under the Shah) to 1.5 per cent during 1979–1983, but this percentage has doubled to 3.7 per cent in 1996–2000 (Hoodfar, 1999; Esfandiari, 1994). This is a major challenge to the credibility of reformist political parties. Indeed, the February 2000 parliamentary elections, in which the reformists won the majority of seats for the first time, produced two women members of parliament (11 altogether) less than the previous parliament in which the hardliners had the majority. But women did better in the February 1999 elections for the city and village councils throughout the country, an election that the reformists forced upon the reluctant hardliners. Women candidates constituted just over 2 per cent of the total candidates, but successful women constituted over 10 per cent of the total elected. Out of 781 women elected, 114 won first or second places in 109 cities. Of 28 provincial capitals only three elected no women counsellors (UNDP, 1999).

Women members of parliament have played an important role in the direction that the Islamic Republic's gender legislation has taken. These women have found themselves in the precarious position of, on the one hand, being elected as members of parliament by a constituency of men and women and, on the other hand, being expected by their male parliamentary colleagues, the women's lobby and women grassroots constituency to focus on women's issues because nobody else would. This is partly due to the culture of segregation and partly because of the limited representational opportunities open to women. Under the pressure to represent women's interests and through taking up concrete women's issues, some of these women have

¹¹ See Peyvand's Iran News (2000) and **Hoghugh Zanan**, No. 16, July 2000, pp. 26–29, about the internationalization of the women's movement. See also various issues of **Farzaneh**, the interview with its editor in Abasgholizadeh (2000), and **The Special Issue on Women's Studies of The Foreign Policy Journal**, Vol. 9, Summer 1995.

¹² CEDAW is the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was adopted in Beijing in 1995. See various issues of **Farzaneh** and the interview with its editor in Abasgholizadeh (2000). Also see **Hoghugh Zanan**, No. 16, July 2000, pp. 26–29 about the activities of the Iranian delegation in the United Nations Beijing Plus Five event in New York in June 2000.

developed gender awareness and a feminist point of view that they did not have when they started as members of parliament. Some use this awareness in a reformist direction and some in support of the hardliners (Afshar, 1998). Therefore, not all of the laws passed on women have been reformist and women members of parliament have not always succeeded in preventing the passing of discriminatory bills that the hardliners (male and female) have been determined about.

However, it can be said with certainty that no positive laws have been passed on gender without women members of parliament initiating them. There are many examples of the earlier Islamization measures by Ayatollah Khomeini that have reformed through the efforts of these women. These touch upon education (reversal of the earlier ban on women to study “male” subjects such as agriculture and mining), professions (reversal of the earlier ban on women becoming judges and on their recruitment as police women), marriage (standard marriage forms that enable women to negotiate the terms of the marriage contract), alimony (reevaluation of the alimony set at the time of marriage in line with the inflation at the time of divorce), divorce (reinstatement of women’s conditional right to divorce, which used to be part of the Pahlavi Family Protection Law), and so on.

These modest achievements should be put alongside women’s participation in welfare organizations and awareness-raising ventures. A modest estimate put the number of “official and government-affiliated” women’s NGOs active in the mid-1990s at 40, and mentioned around 10 women’s periodicals of various political shades (Ahmady-Khorasany, 1999). According to Zahra Shojai¹³, the pro-NGO policies of the Khatami government facilitated the mushrooming of NGOs from 49 in 1997 to 248 in 2001. In her opinion, President Khatami’s government was the first to put NGOs at the heart of its civil society development programme and allocate a budget to it. According to her, the NGO support budget of the Centre for Women’s Participation increased from 60 million tumans in 1997 to 250 million tumans in 2000. These women’s NGOs include those formed by Afghan and Kurdish refugee women, religious minorities such as Zoroastrians and Jews, and Armenians. There are also substantial numbers of grassroots women’s groups and co-operatives around the country, including 92 supported by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Construction Corporation (UNDP, 1999).

Emergence of new political space

The erosion of popular support for the hardline state was one of the most important factors behind the rise of reformism. The tangible reasons for this included economic stagnation, war, authoritarianism, corruption and misappropriation of funds and the state’s attempts to regulate the private and social lives of its citizens, and so on. These factors gradually eroded the genuine mass support for the Islamic Republic and amounted to a crisis of legitimacy for the hardliners controlling the key apparatuses of the state.

But there was another significant contributor to the emergence of reformism that may not have been so tangible before the presidential election of 1997. It was the merging of the social

¹³ In a conversation with the author.

currents of Islamization and secularization that had been moving in parallel since the Revolution. These processes eventually met up and created a “middle ground” polity, referred to as the civil society. On the one hand, the Islamization process, which started with the issue of women’s position in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution and engulfed the society, made a lasting impact on the Iranian society. It reinforced the traditionally prevalent social conservatism, which had existed before the Revolution during the Pahlavi era (perceived as a secular political era) and drove secular social groups toward common language and thought with moderate Islamists. On the other hand, a parallel current of secularization ran counter to Islamization. The influence of the secularization process opened many windows in Islamism and brought many supporters of the Islamic Republic closer to secularists. Eventually the merging of these two processes created new opportunities for political development.

But what were the driving forces of the process of secularization? This process has been commented upon in the Iranian studies literature as significant to the understanding of Islamist reformism and feminism. The key to this process is seen to be both external and internal factors. The external factors included, briefly speaking, globalization or the influence of global forces and developments that neither the population nor the state in Iran could be “protected” from, and the close links between Iranians inside and outside the country. The most significant internal factor was the exposure of the men and women of religion to political power inside Iran, which is worth expanding on here with some examples. Many examples have been given in Iranian studies literature of how the different categories of Islamists of the revolutionary era (such as the ultra conservative clerics or radical anti-American youth of the early 1980s) have now changed their Islamist outlook due to their exposure to concrete power and authority. Mir-Hosseini has argued that “when they were in opposition, the clerics, as guardians of Islam, could deal with practical issues at an abstract and generalized level, leaving it to the conscience of the believer to interpret and carry out the appropriate practices” (1999:7), but “when Sharia¹⁴ becomes part of the apparatus of a modern nation state, its custodians may have to accommodate, even seek novel interpretations. This opens room for change on a scale that has no precedent in Islamic history” (1999:273).

Others have shown how the wide range of issues faced by the Islamist elite as state functionaries, for which no ready-made Sharia answers exist, have had a secularizing effect on them (Boroujerdi, 2001; Kian-Thiebaut, 1998; Schirazi, 1997). Adelkhah (2000) has described the impact of the exercise of power and facing reality by Islamists and noted the reformulation of their social role as a result: “Defense of their special corporate identity no longer seems a crucial issue, since an increasing number of men of religion participate fully not only in the exercise of power but much more widely in the life of society as doctors, journalists, deputies, mayors, military personnel, even television producers” (Adelkhah, 2000:101). Hoodfar (1998) has described the unintended consequences of governmental projects that depend on mobilizing women—in this case volunteer health workers. Women selected from neighbourhoods by Community Health Centres of the Ministry of Health and trained as health workers, gained both self-confidence and neighbourhood recognition; they learned to expect betterment of their

¹⁴ Body of Islamic rules that governs the lives of Muslims.

daily lives from the government and to become campaigners and activists for local change. It is from among these activists that some of the reformists and their supporters have emerged.

Other examples of how exposure has fed into the secularization process can be given in relation to women. As mentioned above, the Islamic Republic's ability to bring out those categories of women who had remained untouched by or resistant to Pahlavi modernization has had significant consequences for the society. These women, who were isolated and alienated from public life during the Pahlavi era, came from a range of backgrounds including urban and rural women from low-income groups, those with strong religious beliefs and those whose family members had been subjected to the human right abuses of the Pahlavi state, and so on. The exposure of these women to the outside world not only changed the women themselves, but also helped to change the state and the society, and with these Islam itself. Furthermore, the flourishing of women's intellectual and cultural production has been very impressive. In literature, cinema and arts, women have produced a flurry of work in the past two decades, all highly gendered, politicized and marked by issues of presentation and representation of women (Nafisi, 1994). This has no doubt played a part in bringing women of various social groups closer in identity and interest. The more oppositional women's politics and the more independent their activism, the more it became possible for moderate Islamist and secularist feminists to work with each other. Throughout the Islamic Republic, the moderate Islamist and secular women activists inside Iran have acted as the conscience of the society, giving a "formal" and public voice to the changes that have affected women and the society. Some of the Islamist women have taken their opposition to the state's gender policies as far as formulating "feminist" alternatives. There have been many locally generated pragmatic examples of collaboration among feminists with Islamic and secular tendencies. Indeed, despite its limited nature, it is surprising how much collaboration has been achieved between these women under such a harsh political suppression.¹⁵ Islamist feminists have also embraced international collaborations and participated in UN events, which has exposed them to secular influences.

The new "middle ground" polity created by the merging of Islamization and secularization processes found an opportunity to burst into the open in May 1997. The mass support of women and young people for the presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who promised democracy and the rule of law, was the first open display of the quiet and spontaneous opposition of ordinary people to the hardline Islamist state. It was the proof of the birth of the new public space in Iranian politics, that is, the civil society. By voting for President Khatami, women and young people established themselves as the founding forces of a new civil society. This display of "womanpower" against the establishment through the ballot box—a first in Iranian politics of normal times—was no doubt made possible by the precedence of women's mass participation in the Revolution. But in a society that had been traditionally dominated by elder statesmen, the reality of women and young people bringing presidents and parliaments into power proved a shock and made the new political space all the more novel. This was another major contribution by women to the emergence of reformism in the Islamic Republic.

¹⁵ See **Bad Jens** (www.badjens.com) for examples of such collaborations. These were also reflected in the magazines cited in footnote 6.

The challenge of reform

The ongoing battle that ensued between the reformist and the hardliner factions of the state took the reform agenda through many victories and setbacks. The reformists controlled the presidency and the government, and the hardliners controlled all other organs of the state. During the early years of reformist presidency, government policies helped to develop the reform agenda in at least two ways. First the conceptual development of the new political space, particularly in relation to freedom of expression. Second the extension of the reformist power base by gaining control of the legislature.

Conceptually, the new political space was shaped as a universalist, democratic and pluralist space in which the boundaries of secularism and Islamism merged and the divisions between “insiders” and “outsiders” (so obsessively maintained by Islamist hardliners) got blurred. It was also perceived as a gender-neutral space in which the political interests of men and women were equally represented.¹⁶ The new political space gave rise to a repertoire of oppositional political vocabulary such as “civil society”, “rule of law”, “social justice”, “human rights”, “political development”, “citizenship rights”, “popular sovereignty”, “participation”, “empowerment”, and so on. Such terms appeared on the lips of ordinary people unexpectedly and gained rapid currency through the efforts of the reformist press. They articulated a whole range of concrete concerns by ordinary people from loss of livelihoods, lack of dignity, security and freedom of expression, to the arbitrary and unjust nature of the rule of the hardliners and the role of the Islamic jurisprudence (*Velayate faqih*) in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. The new terms that gave expression to these concerns were regarded as neither Islamic nor secular but universal principles of humanity applicable to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The early years of reformist presidency also gave rise to the mushrooming of the oppositional press and a vocal student movement. People rewarded the government handsomely for its policy of freedom of expression when reformists attempted to extend their power base into the legislature. The elections of the local councils (the first since the Revolution despite the existence of this provision in the Constitution) and the sixth post-revolutionary parliament were won over by the reformists amid a huge process of resistance and obstacle-creation by the hardliners.

But these successes made the hardliners determined to turn the tide by using (and abusing) all of their Constitutional power. Therefore, the second half of the reformist presidency was characterized by the reversals and paralysis of the gains made in the first half. Response from the hardliners to the development of the reform agenda took two directions. The predominant response was to create barriers at every stage against the revered symbols of reformism. The courts closed down reformist press and jailed reformist journalists (with over 45 newspapers/magazines closed and over 15 journalists in jail to date); those who talked to Western media and took part in conferences in Western countries were arrested, jailed, fined or threatened (some of them women activists); lawyers defending human rights abuse cases were harassed and prevented from practicing (including one prominent woman human rights lawyer); the student movement was crushed and its leaders jailed; the Islamist moderate nationalist party (the Freedom Movement of Iran), which had formed Ayatollah Khomeini's

¹⁶ This was rejected by Islamist feminists, as we shall note later.

first post-revolutionary provisional government and had been allowed to operate in a low-key way, was crushed and its leaders arrested; many reformist candidates for the local council and parliamentary elections were disqualified and 14 parliamentary seats were left unoccupied to prevent more reformists being elected; popular government ministers such as Ataollah Mohajerani (Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance, who was behind the mushrooming of the oppositional press) were removed from their posts under pressure; President Khatami's aid faced assassination attempts; and so on. All this was achieved by the hardliners on the strength of the extreme and arbitrary powers accorded to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei by the Constitution. The political manipulation of the judiciary enabled the courts to convict anyone they did not like and the direct intervention of the Supreme Leader in the affairs of the legislature prevented the sixth parliament from passing reformist laws. The screw was so tightened by the hardliners that by the end of the first reformist presidency even the parliament stopped being a safe forum of expression for reformists. By the end of its first term, the presidency of Khatami and the policy and practice of the reformist government had reached total stalemate.

Whether President Khatami's inability to carry out even his basic constitutional responsibilities resulted in a serious loss of popularity for him and his reformist government can only be gauged after the presidential election of June 2001. However, despite the limited nature of the reforms achieved, there can be no doubt that the reformists managed to shift the arena of political struggle fundamentally and determine the terms of the political debate in the Islamic Republic. For this reason, a second response to reformism recently emerged among the hardliners that envisaged survival in caution and compromise. With such massive loss of legitimacy, which had left their ranks in disarray and its leaders at a loss as to what else to try to prevent power slipping from their hands, some hardliners attempted to narrow the gap with the reformists and reach a stable power sharing arrangement through negotiation with President Khatami. The president was reported to be using this opportunity to negotiate guarantees for his constitutional powers if he was to stand for a second term.

The depth of change that has affected the politics of the Islamic Republic in recent years, despite the continuity of the Constitution and the political system, is obvious when one compares the terms of the political debate before and after the first reformist presidency. The experience of the exposure of men of religion to power and the emergence of the new political space has made the boundaries between "hardliner", "reformist", "Islamist", "secularist", and so on, very flexible and created a great deal of ideological overlap despite sharp political differences. So much so that it is difficult to fit in the student movement, the protesting crowds or the intelligentsia into the ideological labels of Islamists and secularists. There is no clear dividing line between the state and the civil society either. The government of President Khatami has effectively acted as an opposition inside the state. The dividing line on gender has been blurred too. Some hardliners in positions of power have demonstrated a better understanding of women's issues than some reformists. The experience of the past few years has also raised more questions than answers about the future. With many tests still ahead for the fragile power relations within this diverse reformist movement, the future of Islamist reformism in Iran and

its gender boundaries remain an open question. But what is clear is that in the current political context in Iranian Islamist reformism has the best chance of initiating and carrying through positive political change in Iran, albeit to an unpredictable degree. It is therefore important to assess the potentials and limitations of reformist political thought on gender as manifested in the past few years.

II. The Gender Boundaries of Reformism

The broad alliance of reformists, who have occupied the middle ground of politics in opposition to Islamist hardliners, is comprised of a range of pragmatic Islamists and secularists inside and outside Iran. Among the host of individuals and groups that have contributed to the civil society movement in Iran, three loosely grouped, interconnected intellectual and political oppositional categories can be regarded as the key Islamist contributors. Together, these groups have presented a fairly comprehensive set of Islamist alternatives to the Islamic Republic's vision of gender. This section of the paper maps out the key reformist views, assesses their potentials for the progression of the gender debate, identifies their limitations on gender, and discusses the mutual influence of reformism and feminism.

Dynamic jurisprudence

One of the influential oppositional views in the Islamic Republic has come from the heart of the establishment, that is the clerics. This is another unintended consequence of the exposure of Shiism to state power. The state in the Islamic Republic is run by the clergy and Shii jurisprudence, which has been the traditional sphere of power and authority for the clergy and is the basis of state policies. The crisis of legitimacy of the clerical rule and the fact that the Shii jurisprudence did not have ready-made answers for the social issues faced by the clerics has strengthened the growth of “alternative” jurisprudence. Dynamic jurisprudence (*feqh puya*), as opposed to the traditional jurisprudence (*feqh sonnati*) that the state clerics adhere to, is among the most credible alternatives (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). It tries to open up the jurisprudence to new solutions in response to new problems. As a result, Shii jurisprudence and its underlying gender perceptions have started to change in the direction of the civil society movement.

Those who have contributed to the development of alternative jurisprudence have included high-ranking clerics, such as Ayatollahs Jannati, Sanei and Shabestari, and a number of less senior proponents, such as Hojatoleslams Saidzadeh, Mojtabeh-Shabestari, Kadivar and Yusofi-Eshkevari—each with a special emphasis and approach of their own.¹⁷ The theoretical basis of dynamic jurisprudence comes from the 1970s modernizing work of Ayatollah Motahhari in his **Systems of Women's Rights in Islam** and **The Hejab Issue** (Motahhari, 1974 and 1978). In these works, he rejects the call for “equality” of rights by interpreting “equality” as “similarity” of rights and argues that the biological differences between men and women make similarity of

¹⁷ Mir-Hosseini (1999) is the most comprehensive work in English so far on dynamic jurisprudence. These clerics are under state censorship and some, like Saidzadeh and Yusofi-Eshkevari, have been imprisoned and banned from preaching. Yusofi-Eshkevari is in prison for participating in a conference in Berlin. On Mojtabeh-Shabestari, see Vahdat (2000) and the interview with him in *Zanan*, No. 57, October 1999, pp. 18–22. On Yusofi-Eshkevari, see (2000a) and (2000b). On Kadivar, see the account of his defense in the court in Kadivar (1999a and 1999b).

rights untenable. Motahhari developed a comprehensive argument for an “equal but different” system of rights for men and women in family and society based on their specific natural, biological and psychological attributes. Motahhari’s modernization of jurisprudence transferred the family from the realm of religion to the realm of nature and created stereotypes of “femininity” and “masculinity”, which he saw as being based on men and women’s biological endowments. In doing so, he defined monogamy as the natural form of family, advocated choice for women in selecting the form of *hejab* and argued for releasing women from home to take up social and political responsibilities (Paidar, 1995).

Dynamic jurisprudence is particularly relevant and important in the context of this paper because it opens jurisprudence to influence and change.¹⁸ Ayatollah Mohammad Ebrahim Jannati,¹⁹ one of the key proponents of dynamic jurisprudence, who has been subjected to censorship, has articulated this approach as follows: “when there is change, either internal or external, in the subject matter of a Sharia Ruling, naturally a different Ruling will be needed: this does not mean a change in the divine laws as such, but merely a change in the nature of the subject which gave rise to that ruling in the first place” (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:113). This creates the possibility of leaving aside Sharia rules addressing gender relations when social conditions change and introducing new ones that are more suitable to the new conditions. In applying this approach to women’s rights, Ayatollah Sanei has argued that since the situation of women has changed “so the civil law should change too. Our current civil laws are in line with the traditional society of the past, whereas these civil laws should be in line with contemporary realities and relations in our own society” (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:160). He believes that “women must be equal to men as justice demands ... with a caveat that ... we must make distinction between equality and similarity”, and puts emphasis on the duty of the Islamic state to protect women’s rights against male discrimination and abuse (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:147–169).

The younger generation of the clerics of dynamic approach, such as Saidzadeh, have a more radical approach. They have moved beyond Motahhari on the issue of equality versus similarity of rights. Saidzadeh rejects the prevalent “inequality perspective” in jurisprudence and replaces it with his “equality perspective”, in which “women’s gender roles are defined and regulated more by familial and social circumstances than by nature and divine will” (cited in Mir-Hosseini, 1999:249). This represents the first departure from Motahhari in jurisprudence since he presented his work, and demonstrates that remaining static is not an option in Shii jurisprudence any more. In his lecture to an audience of secular feminists in 1995 in the United States (by the invitation of a group of pragmatic women who aimed to put Iranian women in exile in touch with reformists and feminists inside Iran), Saidzadeh talked about the reconcilability of feminism with Islam. He defined feminism “as a social movement whose agenda is the establishment of women’s human rights. Feminism endeavours to free women from an unwanted subordination imposed on them by andocentric societies; it recognises that

¹⁸ For a description in English of the views of some of the adherents of dynamic jurisprudence and how they have built on or diverted from Motahhari’s views, see Mir-Hosseini (1999).

¹⁹ Different from his namesake Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who is an arch traditionalist.

women are independent and complete beings, and puts the emphasis on the common humanity of the sexes, not their differences” (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:249).

Religious intellectuals

Another influential oppositional group within the civil society movement is known as “religious intellectuals” (*roshanfekran dini*). The choice of adjective “religious”, as opposed to “Islamic”, is deliberate and is aimed at preserving the theoretical and political distance between these reformists and the hardliners; it also reflects the rejection of ideological versions of Islam by this group. Religious intellectuals represent a departure from the 1960s and 1970s modernization of Islam (associated with Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Motahhari and Mehdi Bazargan). Each of these reformists, in their own different way, tried to reconcile Islam with modernity or bridge the gap between tradition and progress. But religious intellectuals move beyond these dichotomies and attempt to reconcile them. The best known representative of the “religious intellectual” position, in both Iran and the West, is Abdolkarim Soroush, who is British educated and has lectured extensively about his special brand of Islamism. The presentation here is focused on aspects of his views that have an implication on gender. As will be demonstrated later, while his theory of Islam includes emancipatory potentials for women living under an Islamist state, his political views are limited and discriminatory (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). The emancipatory potentials of Soroush’s theory of Islam arise from a number of interventions on the fundamental tenets of the Islamic Republic, which can be summarized as follows.²⁰

The first set of interventions by Soroush is on the understanding of Islam. This has two dimensions. One is the separation of religion from religious knowledge. He considers the core Islamic texts—that is the Koran, the *hadith* (the Prophet’s sayings) and the teachings of the Shii Imams (descendents of the Prophet)—as the divine and unchangeable timeless “religion”, and regards any attempt to reconcile these with the outside world an illusion. However, according to him, the human understanding of these texts, “religious knowledge”, is by necessity time and context bound, and therefore subject to constant change. Religious knowledge is about interpreting the “divine” infinitely, incorporating learning from other religions or non-religious knowledge in the process. That is why the medieval version of Islam has to be sharply different from the modern version, and that is why the modern versions have to be different from each other according to the context. That is also why religious knowledge (in any form and coming from any authority), not being divine by the virtue of its subject matter, is open to criticism. The separation of religion from religious knowledge has been regarded as a major contribution to Islamic theory in post-revolutionary Iran, and the main way in which Soroush has transcended the work of the Islamist modernists of the 1960s and 1970s (Boroujerdi, 1994). But in his view there is another dimension to the understanding of Islam—that is the separation of religious knowledge from religious ideology. He believes that religious ideology (defined as socio-political guide to action, an instrument used to determine and direct public behaviour) by necessity hinders the development of religious knowledge and has to be abandoned. In his

²⁰ The main sources used in English on the views of Abdolkarim Soroush are Vakili (1996), Boroujerdi (1994 and 2001) and Mir-Hosseini (1999). These works refer to Soroush’s original works in Farsi.

view, it is impossible to force people into becoming religious and religion is something that individuals must choose freely if it is to have meaning and value.

The second set of interventions made by Soroush is on the nature of the state in an Islamic society. He proposes that Islamic ideology should not be the basis for governing a modern society. He tries to show the fallacies of imposing an Islamic model of governance on a complex society and criticizes the role of the jurist (fa'iqh) and the clerical establishment in the Islamic Republic. His criticism is based on the separation of jurisprudence (feqh) from theology (kalam) and the impact of extra-religious concepts on religion. In Soroush's view, in the modern world humans enjoy certain rights that (no matter where they originate from) have become part of the meaning of humanity. He believes that these include concepts such as justice, freedom, democracy, human rights, and so on, which are not defined in the core religious texts, do not play a role in jurisprudence, and can only enter religion through theologically based dialogue and debate with other religious and non-religious discourses. Therefore, "a religious state that reduces its notion of justice to the implementation of jurisprudence can only jeopardize these extra-religious rights" (Vakili, 1996:19). His view of jurisprudence is that it is inadequate for the rational administration of complex modern societies. He believes that religious values should be reflected in the state and its policies/laws, but advocates the removal of jurisprudence as the basis for legislation. He does believe that in the modern world answers to social issues should be sought in social sciences in conjunction with the society's religious values and not in jurisprudence. This leads Soroush to a devastating criticism of the role of the clergy and the clerical establishment in the politics of the Islamic Republic.

The third set of interventions by Soroush is on issues of democracy, human rights and culture. He believes that democracy is the only form of governance that is compatible with religious values in the age of globalization. This is based on two premises. The first is that Soroush does not advocate the separation of religion from politics as such, but aims to replace the top-down imposition of religious ideology on people with a bottom-up reflection of people's religious values in the state and its policies: "if a government in a religious society reflects public opinion, then it necessarily will be a religious government" (Vakili, 1996:21). The only legitimate form of Islamic (as opposed to Islamist) government is one that is elected by a nation with religious values out of free choice in a pluralist political environment. Hence the importance of the development of religious knowledge in interaction with other religions and non-religious knowledge to make Islam the people's choice. The second premise is that democracy and its associated rights are extra-religious concepts and have to be accepted by religion as the basis for the legitimacy of a religious state. Soroush considers democracy as both a value system and a form of governance, and considers the pluralism of power and accountability of those in positions of power as the key to rational and just politics.

Soroush's view is that in the modern world human rights are embedded in justice and, if they are sacrificed for ideology, the religious government will not be seen as just. Moreover, an Islamic government that is reduced to jurisprudence fails to use religious and non-religious knowledge in interpreting the core religious texts, and since the discourse of human rights is the dominant

non-religious knowledge of our time, the legitimacy of the government and its laws will be questioned by the public. He considers democracy and human rights universal concepts and rejects the relevance of their Western origin to their centrality to the Iranian culture. Indeed, he believes, Iranians are heirs to three cultures: pre-Islamic, Islamic and Western. According to him, instead of privileging one over the others, Iranians should attempt to reconcile and recompose all three (Boroujerdi, 1994). He considers cultures heterogeneous and open to change and argues that cultural growth requires borrowing from others. This makes it possible for the developing nations to borrow from the West without falling into the trap of “Westernization”. He acknowledges the difficulties involved in balancing cultural identity with universalism, but does not consider them insurmountable as long as generalization and dogma are avoided.

Coalition for political development

A third reformist strand to be presented is comprised of the key politicians and oppositional spokespersons who have promoted political development (*tarafdaran toseeh siyasi*). This category, which I have called “the Coalition for Political Development” (or the Coalition) here, is a “rainbow coalition” of numerous reformist groups, including the more influential Front for Participation (*jebhehye mosharekat*), which is the closest of all political organizations to President Khatami; the office of Propagation of Unity (*daftar tahkim vahdat*), which has co-ordinated the students’ movement; and many other groups and independents. The Coalition that brought these groups together as a political force was first formed in 1997 to support Seyyed Mohammad Khatami for presidency. It was strengthened by Khatami’s presidency and led to the appearance of a pro-reform press and the student movement. The demand for democracy, pluralism and freedom of speech and association increased with the elections for local councils in February 1999 and for the sixth post-revolutionary parliament in February 2000. The Coalition supported reformist candidates and won an overwhelming majority of the councils as well as 72 per cent of the seats in the sixth parliament.

The Coalition’s main contribution to the movement of civil society has been the establishment of democratization as the only alternative for the future and creation of a sense of empowerment among people. The view that has bound the Coalition together is that the radical hardliners of the revolutionary era have turned into the conservative forces of the present time and are illegitimately holding on to the institutions of the state despite the loss of legitimacy and popularity. One of the principles of the Coalition has been the replacement of “rule by authority” with “rule by popular consent”. Khatami, too, made democracy and political/cultural plurality the cornerstones of his presidency. In his speech to the Millennium Summit, he expressed his values in this respect:

Through human experience during the last century, democracy has evolved as a value inspiring new modalities of rule. In the age of awakening of peoples and nations, powers are expected to come to terms with this value, and allow human beings to realise the impetus for liberty, freedom, spirituality and dignity. The right of man to determine his destiny, the emanation of political authority from the free will and choice of the populace, its submission to the continued scrutiny of the people and the institutionalization of such human accountability constitute the major characteristics of democracy, which need to be clearly distinguished from its various manifestations. No particular form of democracy can be prescribed as the only and final version. Hence, the unfolding endeavours to formulate democracy in the context of spirituality and morality may usher in yet another model of democratic life.²¹

Furthermore, the Coalition and the reformist government have acknowledged the issue of women's rights. President Khatami has supported the discourse of law as an important political arena for women by saying "I persistently believe in the improvement of laws by a thorough change in our perspective on the world of mankind and the status of women. Of course we are Muslims and abiding by Islamic regulations is compulsory for us although different interpretations may develop" (UNICEF, 1998:9). The Front's agenda for the sixth parliament was:

to institute uniform legal procedures within the country and to eliminate duplicate centres of authority, to reform electoral laws and allow political parties to flourish, initiate legislation defining "political crime" and establish procedures and means for jury selection of political crime, initiate legislative reforms on the freedom of press, remove discriminatory rules and regulations which limit freedom of access to information thus depriving journalists from obtaining information at the national and international levels, remove discriminatory rules for employment of individuals which is a barrier for an equal opportunity employment of Iranian nationals, initiate legislation which fosters equal rights for both men and women, legislate laws which would attract foreign capital thus clarifying laws pertaining to private investment, and initiate comprehensive programme of social welfare, decentralization of government and economic activity throughout the country (Vatandoust, 2000:5).

However, due to the resistance by the hardliners, Khatami and the coalition of his supporters did not have a chance to prove whether their actions matched their words. The only policies that they managed to implement partially were the freedom of the press and expression, and the establishment of the local councils. Since they believed men and women benefited equally from freedom, they did not take special measures to increase women's candidacy for elections or to develop and support women's press and publication. The only special measure taken for women by Khatami was his "institutional approach to women's advancement", which was discussed earlier.

Mutual contributions of reformism and feminism

Although many of the underlying concepts of the above three positions of dynamic jurisprudence, religious intellectualism and the Coalition for Political Development cannot stand up to feminist scrutiny, nevertheless these views have, together, managed to open up the

²¹ See the text of his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 6 September 2000.

political space for Islamist gender activism in a way that had not been possible before. The issue here is not the validity of these theories but the windows that they open in the particular context of Iran for advancing gender politics. The strength of these views is in their immediate relevance to politics in Iran, which has turned the religious intellectuals into one of the most serious groups of critics of the concepts on which the Islamic constitution and state are built. Due to the subversive implications of their views, religious intellectuals have faced tremendous pressure from the hardline establishment, which has only increased their popularity among women and young people.

Sorush's views have found their way into the thinking of the two other categories of reformism discussed. His separation of religion from religious knowledge has allowed the radicals of the dynamic jurisprudence such Saidzadeh to call for the abandonment of the traditional jurisprudence and the Koran in favour of interpretations that are based on time and context (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). His rejection of an Islamic state that is based on jurisprudence in favour of one that gives expression to people's religious values is reflected in President Khatami's "another model of democratic life" based on "spirituality and morality". But there are tensions between the views of the three groups, a major one being the role of jurisprudence in the discourse of reformism. As noted, the rejection of jurisprudence as an arena for gender politics by religious intellectuals and the insistence of the dynamic jurisprudence on the compatibility of *feqh* and women's equality have created a duality of thought that the men of religion have not been able to overcome.

Moreover, the potentials that each theory presents for gender politics are often accompanied with possible theoretical and political barriers to gender equality. Religious intellectuals have avoided engagement in the domain of jurisprudence and used this as a reason for going around the issue of gender equality (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:246). This is a strategy for avoidance of the issue of sexuality. By rejecting jurisprudence as an arena for gender politics altogether, religious intellectuals have undermined the efforts of Islamist women activists to change the legal status of women here and now, instead of sitting and waiting for the ideal society to arrive, where Islamic jurisprudence does not influence the state's gender policies. Religious intellectuals have also promoted democracy in Islam, on the one hand, and conceptualized democracy as a gender-neutral concept, on the other.

The Coalition has only engaged with equal rights as an election manifesto item and failed to go beyond tokenism in bringing women on board and addressing the serious issue of women's absence from political parties and mainstream democracy debates.²² What consistently comes across in elections is that as candidates, women are more wanted by the public than by the political parties. In both of the recent council and parliamentary elections, the percentage of women candidates who won seats out of the total elected, was higher than the percentage of women candidates out of the total put forward by political parties. This means that the public preferred women to men as their elected representatives and, had there been more women candidates, there would probably have been more women members of parliament.

²² See the Islamist feminist criticism of this in *Zanan*, No. 64, June 2000, pp. 2–5.

Furthermore, the failure to incorporate women's issues into mainstream debates has resulted in the virtual "segregation" of women's issues to women's forums—a trend that increases the danger of women's issues becoming special-interest issues. Even the (male) reformist consultants engaged by the President and his aid to the development of concepts and policy often make recommendations on women's issues without reference to women who have already thought through and presented recommendations on such issues.²³

The record of Khatami's government on gender has already been referred to. Although the reformist government has made serious efforts in the direction of engendering the state structure and putting women in decision-making positions, it has done it in a way that has reinforced the segregation of women's issues to women. There is also a lot of scepticism among both secular and Islamist feminists inside Iran about the impact of the NGO support programme of the government. These critics believe that it has not resulted in the creation of an enabling environment for women's independent organizations.²⁴ The Islamist feminist critique of the reformist government points to the lack of a coherent and transparent gender policy and plan in the first term of President Khatami. It also points to the lack of sufficient power and clout by the women's forums within the state. It is argued, for example, that the Centre for Women's Participation has very little influence within the government—indeed, the presence of its director in the cabinet might have been counter-productive because, rather than reducing the conservatism and cautiousness of the government in dealing with hardliners over women's issues, it has resulted in an over-cautious approach by the Centre. It is obvious that the Islamist feminist critique of the government is going to demand change on the above points if President Khatami is elected to a second term.

Moving to the feminist contribution to reformism, this is about how feminism has transformed reformist theories by taking their gender potential forward and bridging the gaps within and between them. Feminist intervention has taken many forms and covered many issues. Not all of them can be covered here, but the most substantial ones will be touched upon below—bridging the gap between jurisprudence and theology, and engendering democracy.

The feminist bridge between jurisprudence and theology

Women have taken up the challenge of gender intervention in both theology and jurisprudence through a number of complementary strategies.²⁵ One strategy has been the reinterpretation of core religious texts. Although the history of interpretive attempts within Islam to deal with questions posed by modern transformations of Islamic societies (including gender) goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, the current interpretive ventures by women are novel and do not have precedence. Whereas the dominant method of interpretation of gender by reformists has been to use more woman-friendly sources from an already-existing set of authoritative exegetical texts, women have engaged in direct interpretations in their own right. They have argued that the domain of interpretation should be open not only to every Muslim, but also to

²³ This was brought up in a conversation with a group of reformist men and women.

²⁴ According to a conversation with these women. See also Kar (2000) and Tohindi (2000), as well as the interview with Masumeh Ebtekar in *Zan Ruz*, No. 1616, August 1997, pp. 6–7.

²⁵ This section has particularly benefited from discussions with Afsaneh Najmabadi.

non-Muslims, as a matter of expertise rather than a question of faith, and that interpretation should take into consideration not only the needs of the time, but also the contemporary schools of philosophy and thought.

Another strategy with a notable consequence has been the one that is fundamentally different from the familiar reformist historicizing and contextualizing in order to delimit the effective field of Koranic verses to a particular time and circumstances. Women's strategy has been to carry out their interpretative ventures in a different social space: in the printed pages of a women's journal; in a public space, rather than the private chambers of a religious scholar. They speak as "public intellectuals", rather than as private theology teachers. Their audience is other women (and men) as citizens, rather than theological students and other clerical commentators. They write not in order to command the believers into obedience, but, as they put it, in order "to awaken women" so that they proclaim their rights. Furthermore, on the issue of rights, women have made another worthy leap, from the pages of their magazines to a seat in parliament and to the floor of the family courts. As members of parliament and lawyers, women have taken important initiatives on women's group rights through legislation and managed to influence the opinion and judgements of the male judges (clerics) in Islamic courts on women's individual rights through jurisprudence-informed defence.

A third strategy has been intervention in jurisprudence on the issue of equality of rights. Whereas almost all mainstream Islamist discourses on women (traditional or dynamic) have based their case for differences of rights and social responsibilities on the differences of women and men in creation and nature, some Islamist feminists have at last severed this widely accepted connection. They argue for the social construction of gender, a debate that is similar to and informed by the discussions within Western feminism. This has enabled Islamist feminists to draw vastly different conclusions (from male Islamist scholars) about gender relations in an Islamic society. Instead of beginning with creation as a narrative of origins for women's rights and responsibilities, they place the individual woman—in her contemporary social concreteness, and her needs and choices—at the centre of their arguments.

The last strategy to comment on has been bringing together "religious" and "extra-religious" knowledge—for example "Islam" and "feminism". For this, women writers and activists had to go beyond the conventional Iranian attitude toward feminism. Attacking feminism out of gender conservatism and Westphobia—that is, distancing oneself from any association with feminism as threatening and as Western—is still a fairly common response among Iranian women, both Islamists and secularists. However, a different response is taking hold among women activists of both persuasions—one based on the affiliation of Islam with feminism. Islamist journals now freely translate from Western feminist writers whatever they consider useful to their readership, and women members of parliament publicly identify themselves with feminism. As noted in the final section of the paper, the introduction of the individual woman's needs and autonomy into an Islamist discourse, and the increasing association by the Islamist women activists with international feminism has opened up a productive space for pragmatic feminism.

The feminist bridge between jurisprudence and theology has produced a radical decentring of the men of religion from the domain of interpretation and reformism, and placed woman as interpreter and her needs as grounds for reformism at the centre of a feminist revisionist effort. That women have now positioned themselves as public commentators of jurisprudence promises that the process of democratization of politics will not remain an exclusively masculine preoccupation. This is also a serious challenge to religious intellectuals and reformist politicians who have by and large left the legal sphere to the clerics of the dynamic jurisprudence. The fact that they are not theologically trained (as claimed by one prominent reformist, Mohammad Javad Kashi) or that the discourse of rights is limiting to their intellectual pursuits (as claimed by religious intellectuals) cannot be a credible reason for the reformist avoidance of gender any more (Noorbakhsh, 2000).

Engendering democracy

The feminist contribution to the cause of reformism in Iran has been equally significant in the field of democracy. Their critique has addressed a number of serious shortcomings in the reformist conceptualization of democracy and human rights, including that of democracy as a gender-neutral process, human rights as a hierarchical process, and feminism as a mission to turn women into men.

The conceptualization of democracy as a gender-neutral process has acquired many dimensions.²⁶ One of the dimensions of the reformist thinking on democracy has been silence on gender on the basis of gender segregation of intellectual fields. For example, in the well-known reformist journal, **Kian**, which had become one of the most important sites of critical rethinking for religious intellectuals, it is not possible to find a woman writer or an article that deals with gender issues. Asked in an interview about the reason for this, Abdolkarim Soroush responded by explaining that religious intellectuals were preoccupied with other pressing issues and believed that women's journals could take care of the gender issues (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:243). Another dimension of the reformist concept of democracy has been the perception that democracy and democratization affect men and women in the same way. Although, historically speaking (and at present), social change in Iran has been constructed through the reorganization of gender relations, that construction seems to have always had a gender-obliviousness screen. Hence the claim that social change is gender-neutral and naturally includes both men and women to equal degree. Abbas Abdi, a prominent writer and editor echoed the widespread reformist perception that the general struggles for citizenship rights would naturally be inclusive of women.²⁷ While a great deal of rethinking and realignment has been taking place on women's issues among Iranian feminists of diverse outlooks in the 1990s, gender seems to be all but non-existent as a category of thinking among some Islamist reformists (Najmabadi, 2000b). This is not, of course, something that is specific to Islamist reformism. As the experience of feminists during the Revolution and in exile has demonstrated,

²⁶ This section is based on a series of interviews with prominent reformists, published in various issues of the women's magazine, **Zanan**, in 1999 and 2000.

²⁷ On Abbas Abdi, see roundtable discussion in **Zanan**, No. 33, April 1997, pp. 12–18, and interviews in No. 58, December 1999, p. 38.

some sections of the secular opposition are as gender-blind as some Islamist reformists (Najmabadi, 1999).

The third conceptual inadequacy has been the perception of human rights as a hierarchical process. Democracy seems to be regarded as a primary type of right that, in the hierarchy of rights, has priority over women's rights, which are regarded as a secondary type of rights. This has further led to the perception of the democracy movement as the "main" struggle and the women's movement as a "deviation". Abbas Abdi articulated this view and concluded that, although it was acceptable that groups would organize for and around their special group rights, one would have to be careful that these special group activities not come into conflict with the broader and more general struggles for democracy. Women have objected to the idea that there is an order of priority in rights and indicated that women's rights are an indispensable part of human rights and hence of the democratization process (Moti', 2000). It has already been pointed out how locating issues of gender in the domain of jurisprudence and considering jurisprudence not the high ground of their intellectual re-mapping of Islam have become the theoretical underpinning of gender-avoidance. Not only is gender inequality not considered an urgent enough matter to be worth their consideration, but also some reformists hope that it will simply "go away when their vision of Islam is realised" (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:276).

Finally, the common fears of women losing womanhood revealed yet another weakness in the reformist gender analysis. Imad-ul-din Baghi drew the attention of women activists to what he called the danger of wanting to replace androcracy with gynocracy,²⁸ and Soroush expressed concern that "women should remain women and men should remain men", and that "one must not impose regulations that would push women outside the circuit of womanhood and men outside the circuit of manhood".²⁹ These concerns and fears aim to postpone, if not outright oppose, equal rights sentiments and activism emerging among women Islamists (Farhi, 1999).

But feminism has begun to make inroads into reformism. A small number of reformists have turned their critical edge to the Islamists' own intellectual outlook. Majid Mohammadi, another prominent reformist, has expressed a scathing critique of "religious intellectuals", pointing out that in the first decade of the revolution this current shared the outlook of those now referred to as "traditionalists" and when it came to restricting women's rights and social participation they collaborated with the latter or kept silent. He commented that, even though this current has now embraced notions of political and cultural liberties, in the domain of individual and social liberties and especially when it comes to issues of gender, it continues to revert to "traditionalist" views that hold women responsible for the upkeep of norms. He further pointed out that, even though this intellectual current has paid critical attention to and embraced some of the socio-philosophical notions from Europe, it has never seriously engaged with feminism, except in gestures of repudiation.³⁰

²⁸ See interview with Baghi in *Zanan*, No. 57, November 1999, pp. 23–24.

²⁹ See interview with Soroush in *Zanan*, No. 59, January 2000, p. 32.

³⁰ For interview with Mohammadi, see *Zanan*, No. 58, December 1999, pp. 39–41.

III. The Dawn of Pragmatic Feminism

Having explored the interface between feminism and reformism, this final section focuses on the diversity within feminism itself. The feminist currents of Islamism and secularism that are the key players in the Iranian women's movement today are discussed. The emergence of a new category of what I have called "pragmatic feminism", which cuts across secularism and Islamism, is also highlighted. The threads that run through the discussion of these feminisms are the key debates in the post-revolutionary Iranian feminism. Two sets of debates have proved particularly persistent within Iranian (and Middle Eastern) women's studies. Namely, the compatibility of Islam and feminism and the universality of women's rights. These issues have surfaced frequently in secularist and Islamist feminist literature, and all key players in Iranian feminism have gone through evolution of thought on these issues.

Secularist feminism

Secularist feminism is a broad umbrella category used for identifying a range of feminisms that revolve around a "secularist" as opposed to a "secular" identity. The difference between these two categories is that a "secularist identity" is a consciously chosen political identity that constructs secularism as the main political dividing line in the context of Iran. Many monarchist and socialist secularists are as ideologically committed and extreme in their secularism as are Islamist fundamentalists in their Islamism. A "secular identity" in the context of Iran, on the contrary, is a much looser and more flexible social identity that can mix with a range of political positions that do not necessarily revolve around secularism.

Secularist feminists cover a wide range of views, often in opposition to each other, and follow a diverse political agenda as socialist, monarchist, social democrat, liberal nationalist, culturalist and radical feminists. Each of these labels covers a variety of hard and soft positions. However, the common secularist identity, held in opposition to Islamism, has brought some of the most divergent of these feminisms closer together—the more sophisticated socialist and monarchist forms, for example—on issues such as the compatibility of Islam and feminism and the universality of women's rights.³¹ Since socialist feminism has presented a more articulate position among secularist feminists, it is drawn upon more than the others here. Particular reference is made to the works of Hideh Moghissi (1996 and 1999), who presents one of the more sophisticated versions of socialist feminism in a systematic manner.

The debate on the compatibility of "Islam" with "feminism" started in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution with many secularists agreeing, for different reasons, that Islam and feminism were incompatible. Many secularists also shared a concern about the term "feminism" (Moghissi, 1996:5–6). But their main problem was with the terms "Islam" and "Islamist feminism". The secularist preoccupation was about identifying the limits of Islam, as a divine ideology, on women's position. The repressive nature of the post-revolutionary state in Iran and its rapid and forced Islamization policy confirmed the age-old theory that Islam was the cause of women's oppression in Iran. This conception inspired a wave of feminist opposition to Islam

³¹ See Paidar (1982) and the Introduction in Paidar (1995) for a critique of the theoretical positions of socialists and monarchists on "Islam versus feminism", "universalism versus cultural relativism" and the concept of patriarchy.

in the 1980s. One of the old theories revived was the “modernization theory” that had underpinned the US support for the Pahlavi modernization in Iran, and formed the theoretical basis for the monarchist opposition to the Revolution. It conceptualized the political history of Iran, particularly in relation to women, in terms of the battle between the forces of “tradition” represented by an essentialized Islam, and forces of “modernity” represented by the Pahlavi state (Beck and Keddie, 1978; Paidar, 1995). The socialist critique of Islam coincided with the modernization theory by arguing that “the struggle between secular modernism and Islamic revival is fundamentally a struggle about secular democracy, economic justice, and the liberation of women, ultimately a claim to replace existing society with a modern, secular society” (Moghissi, 1999:61). Farah Azari rejected the existence of variation within Islam and argued that Islamic bias against women was “at the heart of the tradition of women’s subjugation in Muslim societies” (1983:3). This critique of Islam defined women’s oppression in terms of Islam and saw women’s liberation in opposition to it. It was, therefore, declared that “Islam and feminism are incompatible” (Ghoussoub, 1987:17).

The debate for and against the universality of women’s rights was another key and longstanding one taken up by Iranian feminists after the Revolution. Again, the socialists and monarchists proved to be the most ardent supporters of universalism, which they regarded as the oppositional binary of the cultural relativism of the Islamists. The basis for universalism was identified as patriarchy:

We still may not have a cross-cultural definition of feminism or a feminist framework wide enough to identify women’s oppression in diverse socio-historic contexts. This, however, does not alter the fact that the basis of women’s oppression everywhere is patriarchal structures and relations. Despite diverse forms, they have the same content. Feminist paradigms and frameworks are as useful for understanding and theorizing gender relations in non-western societies as they are in the West. (Moghissi, 1996:17–18)

The aim of universalism was regarded as an “international and unitary [feminist] ideology to cut across national and cultural barriers, to go beyond political systems and economic divisions (Sanasarian, 1982:155). The opposition to cultural relativism and the perceived Western failure to address it was articulated as follows: “Under the pretext of preserving the authentic cultural heritage against foreign influence, the most reactionary practices have been preserved, antiquated sexist traditions reactivated and dissenting voices silenced” (Sanasarian, 1982:1). A commonly held complaint was expressed by secularist feminists against the perceived “silence of feminists in the West in the face of systematic suppression of women’s basic human rights in Iran by the fundamentalists” (Sanasarian, 1982:1). Moghissi argued that this was a dramatic example of “the new opinion that the conditions for sex equality, such as personal freedom, freedom of choice, freedom of refusal and self autonomy are something peculiarly Western [which] permits indifference to or justification of the practices that oppress and de-humanise women in non-western cultures...” (Moghissi, 1996:9).

As pointed out earlier, the experience of the Revolution developed gender awareness among many socialist feminists and turned them into strong advocates of women’s independent

movement. Moghissi argued that “being a feminist begins with the refusal to subordinate one’s life to the male-centred dictates of religious and non-religious institutions” (1999:140). She criticized the pioneers of the women’s movement in the early twentieth century for choosing “formal politics and the patronage of the state to achieve their goals” (Moghissi, 1996:182). However, this was more of an institutional rather than an ideological severing of links. Moghissi’s analysis of women’s oppression in Iran remained firmly within the socialist framework despite a few “add-ons”, such as patriarchy, culture and politics:

The plight of women in Iran is tightly linked with the general problems of material, cultural and political structures in Iran. Every case is a particular case but I do believe that women’s subjugation in Iran has the same roots that it has had in other societies. Positive developments in women’s legal rights, their personal and social independence and freedom have been closely linked with general socio-economic and political developments in all known societies. These developments are preconditions for women’s ideological consciousness and struggle against oppressive patriarchal relations and institutions and sexist norms, values and language. (Moghissi, 1996:188).

In this analysis, class interests were replaced with gender interests and it was argued that “women as women have definable interests and concerns that can form the basis for solidarity, common action and common struggle among women” (Moghissi, 1999:93). It was believed that independent socialist feminism was best placed to represent women’s interests, and other forms of feminism were dismissed. It was argued that “Islamist feminism is connected with the question of the compatibility of feminism with Islamic teaching and scripture, and the social and legal frameworks which have evolved in Islamic societies. How could a religion which is based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men?” (Moghissi, 1999:126). As far as socialist feminists were concerned Islam and Islamism were undefined categories. They spent a great deal of energy on refuting the work of any secular feminist who analysed gender politics in Iran on the basis of differentiation within and deconstruction of these categories. Such secular feminist analyses were regarded as confused (Moghissi, 1999:133) and their authors were accused of being “professional opportunists” guilty of “virtual capitulation by secular feminists to the demands of the religious text” (Moghissi, 1999: 135 and 143). The treatment given to Islamist feminist activists by some socialist feminists was even worse. Women from Iran who were invited for conferences and lectures and who appeared with the *hejab* for personal or political reasons were often shouted down and subjected to insults by socialist (and monarchist) women in the audience.

But, despite its total rejection of Islamist feminism as credible feminist politics, socialist feminism paradoxically shared some of its basic theoretical foundation stones with the more sophisticated versions of Islamist feminism. These included a heavy reference to the concept of patriarchy as “the basis of women’s oppression everywhere”, the universality of women’s rights, the same conceptualization of the equality versus the similarity of rights issue, and so on. As Moghissi put it “feminism’s core idea is that women and men are biologically different but this difference should not be translated into an unequal valuation of women’s and men’s experience; biology should not lead to differences in legal status, the privileging of one over the

other” (Moghissi, 1999:140). Another similarity in the situation of these two feminisms was that both were identified with oppressive political systems: Islamism with the Islamic Republic and socialism with the Soviet Union and other authoritarian socialist regimes. Both have had to obtain credibility by distancing themselves from authoritarianism and demonstrating the existence of variation of political thought and agenda within their ideology. Both have had to argue that women’s position in “true” Islam or socialism is different from that in the existing Islam or socialism.

However, it is important to emphasize the evolution of thought that has occurred within the Iranian socialist feminism since the Revolution. This movement should be credited for moving away from a starting point in which it was not much more than the cheerleader of this or that Marxist-Leninist or Maoist male-dominated organization, to a point where it has articulated its own feminist theory and acquired a cherished political independence. This evolution demonstrates the developmental potentials of socialist feminism for the future. The difference between Moghissi’s first and second books (1996 and 1999), written within a space of few years, is a good indication of the theoretical journey that socialist feminist thought has gone, and is going, through. In the latter, by acknowledging that the definition of feminism needs to be “cross-cultural” to have value, Moghissi has moved a step forward from the problematic universalism that has made the socialist and monarchist (and, as we shall see, also the Islamist) feminisms so theoretically naïve and inadequate. Whereas universalism has identified the dangers imbedded in cultural relativism for women’s rights, it has failed to provide adequate answers to issues of difference (Philips, 2000). Therefore, the gradual introduction of the concepts of difference and multiculturalism into socialist theory has to be a welcome development. Although these concepts are still used as add-ons to materialism, nevertheless their introduction is a good start in the process of the deconstruction of socialist feminist thought in Iran. Moghissi takes issue with what she calls “post-modernism”, but she also attempts to use the ideas associated with it. Deconstruction has contributed to a radical revision of Western socialist feminism in recent decades, and there is no reason why this should not be the case in the context of Iranian socialist feminism.

Islamist feminism

The term “Islamist feminism” was first used within the discipline of Iranian women’s studies in the West to demonstrate the diversity of the post-revolutionary women’s movement (Paidar, 1982). In later years it found a place among the Islamist women activists who had revised their original resistance to the concept of feminism and wished to protect the specificities of their feminism. However, political considerations made it difficult for these women to publicly use the term Islamist feminism. While many of them privately identified with this term, and in the past few years many have made their allegiance to feminism and their definition of it public, until recently none used the term “Islamist feminist” publicly. This was because putting the adjective “Islamist” next to the term “feminist” had the potential of causing more trouble (from hardliners) than using the term “feminist” on its own. The term “Islamist feminist” has been widely used in the West but has also attracted negative comments. Within the Iranian women’s studies literature, where negative comments are often stated in passing rather than presented as substantiated arguments, they have come from both those who oppose the compatibility of

feminism with Islam (Moghissi, 1999:126) and those who support it (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:6). None, however, has been able to explain why it is justified to use the terms “socialist feminism” or “liberal feminism”, but not “Islamist feminism”, if indeed that is how women wish to identify themselves. The term is used in this paper for a combination of reasons: the growing interest in feminism by Islamist women, the assertion of the right of those Islamist women who wish to call themselves feminists; and the inadequacy of the theoretical opposition to this term.

Islamist feminism is a broad category comprised of all feminists who hold “Islamist”, as opposed to Islamic or Muslim, identity. The difference between these two categories is that an “Islamist identity” is a consciously chosen political identity that constructs Islamism as the main political dividing line in the context of Iran. On the contrary, an “Islamic or Muslim identity” in the context of Iran is a much looser and more flexible social identity that can mix with a range of political positions that do not necessarily revolve around Islamism.

Islamist feminisms represent different shades of reformist politics and there has been no collective presentation or assertion of the principles and agenda of “Islamist feminism” in public. There are a lot of reasons for this—some of which were mentioned in the first section of the paper—but self-censorship is bound to feature among them. The public statements of Islamist feminists often have to be a lot more conservative than their actual beliefs if they are to avoid the wrath of the hardliners. But further field research is required to understand the Islamist feminist thoughts and beliefs; the political and social circumstances under which feminists have worked, developed their ideas and related to each other; and the ways in which they have related to their constituents, the state, the Islamist opposition and to secularist feminism. However, it is possible to present a collection of ideas and positions from Islamist feminist writings, public statements and, more importantly, private conversations in the past few years. The claim is not that these views are held by all Islamist feminists or even by the majority of them, or that any of them accept all of the views represented, but rather that they have found their way into Islamist feminist thought in Iran. The following views, some recorded in published work and some expressed by different Islamist feminists at different times to different women interviewers, give an indication of the current boundaries of Islamist feminism, its fluid nature and its future potentials.³²

Islamist feminists are devout believers and practice the basic tenets of Islam by personal choice. Many consider the place of religion to be in the private realm, and do not associate themselves with the interpretation of Islam as a political system by which a society should be governed. Many of them follow the religious intellectuals in basing the legitimacy of politics in pluralism of thought and democratic mandate from the people. They consider equality of rights in the family and social spheres compatible with their Islam, but incompatible with the Islam represented by the hardliners—that is the “traditional Islam” being practiced in Iran today. They believe that many of the gender positions attributed to Islam are not in fact Islamic but

³² The public positions of Islamist feminists are reflected in the women’s magazines mentioned in footnote 6. For works in English that discuss the positions of Islamist feminists, see those by Afshar, Haeri, Hoodfar, Keddie, Kian-Thiebaut, Mir-Hosseini, Najmabadi, Nakanishi, Paidar, Rostami-Povey, and Tohidi.

arise from the patriarchal control of men over women. Their effort is focused on proving this and detaching Islam from its patriarchal heritage. Their goal is to bring Islam in line with the requirements of the modern woman through interpretive ventures. Their emphasis is on stretching the gender boundaries of Islam, changing it to accommodate what women need for a modern life as opposed to changing women's position to bring it in line with Islam, as it exists today.

On women's role within the family, they believe that the biological differences between men and women should not give rise to inequality of rights (Afshar, 1998). They believe in equal rights as well as additional positive rights for women because of their childbearing role. They have campaigned for increasing the age of marriage for women and against arranged marriages in which the woman does not assert a free choice. Many have spoken out against polygamy and temporary marriage, which is specifically a Shii practice (Haeri, 1989). They have advocated divorce laws that are based on women's autonomy, choice and economic security, and custody laws that are based on the best interests of the child and the mother. They have campaigned for recognition of housework as paid work to increase housewives' independence and influence in family affairs. They have also supported family planning and greater involvement of men in housework and child rearing to release women for social activities. On abortion, it has been stated that the mother's health and control are paramount in any decision taken on abortion, but further research is required to establish the range of Islamist feminist views on abortion as this is an area of great sensitivity for any religion.

Many Islamist feminists have condemned state and family-based violence and abuse against women, but, here again, it would be necessary to carry out additional research on the different views they hold on the infamous Law of Retribution (*qanun qesas*), which has legalized punishments such as stoning to death for women and men convicted of adultery and homosexuality. Some Islamist feminists publicly protest against the unequal treatment of men and women in the Law of Retribution (Hashemi, 1982). Research is also required to establish the range of views on sexual freedom and homosexuality. It is obvious that these are sensitive issues for any religion, but it would be useful to establish (though difficult due to political repression) the degree of choice and individuality that Islamist feminists are prepared to advocate on sexuality. The more liberal of Islamist feminists have kept quiet about these issues, but chosen to endorse and celebrate the sexually expressive poetry of Forough Farrokhzad who is an icon of female individual sexual freedom and whose brother was a well-known homosexual. Other Islamist feminists have expressed public views that reject sexual freedom and homosexuality (Rahnavard, 1995).

On women's social role, Islamist feminists have almost unanimously supported it and have advocated positive action to ensure women's equal participation at all levels of the political decision-making process and of civil society, including education and employment. Many have rejected the hardline Islamist view that gives less value to women's testimony and prohibits them from becoming judges, and have advocated equality between men and women in these matters. Many Islamist feminists do not consider *hejab* an Islamic practice but a patriarchal one,

and have rejected it as a pre-requisite for women's participation in social life. They practice *hejab* themselves, but have advocated education on "public modesty" for men and women equally, as well as the ability for women to choose whether or not they adopt *hejab* and, if so, what form it should take (Hashemi, 1982; Sherkat, 2000).

Like socialist and monarchist feminists, Islamist feminists started with the proposition that Islam is incompatible with feminism. Their initial response was to treat the issue of women's rights and feminism separately. While it was agreed that Islam had all the credentials to support women's rights to the highest level, not many believed that feminism was compatible with Islam. However, many Islamist feminists have since revised their position and accepted that, as the "theory of universal patriarchal oppression of women", feminism is relevant to the understanding of women's position in Iran (Rahnavard, 1995). Many Islamist feminists now regard themselves as feminists for struggling to overcome patriarchy and achieving equality of rights for women (Abasgholizadeh, 2000).

This interest in feminism has coincided with the general interest in democratization as a universal necessity. In an interesting paper, Nayereh Tohidi (2001) traces the complex trajectory of Islamism on the issue of universalism. Proud of the international adoration for the success of the Iranian revolution, the post-revolutionary Islamist women activists argued that women's emancipation was only possible within Islam and therefore the "Islamic" vision of womanhood was universal. During the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, held in Copenhagen in 1980, the women representing Iran gave this message to the "Muslim women of the world": "Arise! Become like Zeinab [the Prophet's daughter]. Do not allow yourself to be exploited or oppressed. Speak out, because you are the beloved of the God and you bear the heavy responsibility to help lead the deprived and abased to the way of God" (Paidar, 1982:193). In parallel to the emphasis on the universality of women's position in Islam, the Islamists followed an argument on the cultural relativism of women's position in the West, but in later years, many of the statist and independent Islamist feminists converted to the idea of the universality of women's rights (Tohidi, 2001). Tohidi (2001) argues that (leaving aside the de-legitimization of the hardliners and the secularization trend in Iran) two main developments have contributed to this trajectory. First, the failure of the "Islamic model of womanhood" propagated by the Iranian government in gaining international recognition. Second, the international condemnation of the Islamization policies of the government and the pressure on Iran to conform to the international standards on women's human rights (mainly through the United Nations and other international fora).

Islamist feminism (even in its sophisticated mode) suffers from serious theoretical inadequacies that it needs to address urgently. These include the essentialization of both Islam and the West, and the theoretical vacillation between cultural relativism and universalism—both with their own dangers for women's rights. There is an urgent need for a fundamental rethinking of Islamist feminism on the concepts of Islam and patriarchy, and the issues of difference and multiculturalism. However, Islamist feminist politics should be commended for developing substantially since its beginnings 22 years ago. In the context of the isolationism of the

established Islam and the reformist-hardliners' rivalry in Iran, the move to patriarchy and the universality of rights as a mode of analysis, although theoretically as problematic as cultural relativism, has politically strengthened the Islamist feminist movement by linking it to the democratization movement inside Iran and the international women's movements supported by the United Nations. Islamist feminists, like most other Iranian feminists, have emphasized social responsibility as opposed to individual rights. Indeed, looking back at Iranian history in the past century, ideas of individuality, autonomy and choice have not been part of the political discourse (the state, the opposition or the women's movement) until relatively recently. Even the Iranian secularist feminisms of today fall short of the ideal on these principles. In this context, it is fair to acknowledge that Islamist feminists have come a long way toward liberal feminism on issues of individual rights, choice and autonomy (Najmabadi 1998a, 2000a, 2000b).³³ All this shows that the "identity" expressed by many Islamist feminists is in fact quite complex and rather individualized.³⁴ It often incorporates not only elements of what they call "true Islam", but also what they regard as the egalitarian and non-exploitative elements of Western political and social thought and feminist history (Tohidi, 2001). Islamist feminism has moved from a passionately religious movement two decades ago to one that is a mixture of social conservative, culturalist and liberal feminism. The Islamist feminism of today has successfully dissociated itself from the Islamist hardline positions represented in many of the key apparatuses of the state. It has taken up a credible oppositional stand on behalf of women in Iran.

Pragmatic feminism

One of the impacts on feminism of the twin processes of Islamization and secularization has been the emergence of a new category of feminism, which I have called pragmatic feminism. This emerging category has cut across secularism and Islamism, which were once regarded as self-contained categories of feminism and attracted a range of women with secular, Islamic or Muslim identities. The political orientation of pragmatic feminists tends to be moderate and centre ground, ranging from social democratic and liberal nationalism to culturalist nationalism and reformist Islamism. As noted before, the opposition to pragmatism and collaboration across Islamism and secularism has acted as a unifying factor for diverse ideologies such as hardline Islamism, socialism and monarchism.

Pragmatism is not an ideology, in the sense that Islamism and socialism are, and therefore it is not possible to assign to it a coherent pragmatist theoretical position on feminist debates as opposed to the views of Islamists and secularists. Rather, it is a political culture and approach that many Iranian feminists have adopted spontaneously. It advocates a pragmatic approach to the issues of difference and multiculturalism rather than a theoretical/political position on either side of the fence on the debates on "Islam versus feminism" or "universalism versus cultural relativism". The pragmatist approach in feminism has spread not through a conscious feminist campaign but through sporadic collaborative ventures and contributions to the Iranian women's studies literature inside and outside the country. It is a concept that was developed

³³ See for example the editorial of the **Hoghugh Zanan**, No. 18, October/November 2000, pp. 4–5.

³⁴ Also as an example see the profile of Faeze Hashemi-Rafsanjani in Price (2000), and the interview with her in **Zanan**, No. 28, April 1996.

only recently, and whether or not it will continue to be used in the future is an open question. There is no doubt, however, that pragmatic feminism is a trend that has been growing within Iranian feminist politics (Keddie, 2000). This may be the right moment for giving “pragmatic feminism”, as a political category, a public voice and forum.

As a political culture, pragmatic feminism is about creating an enabling and empowering feminist environment in which each category of feminism can be supported and encouraged to stretch its own boundaries and bring out its own full potential rather than corner the other's feminism into entrenched positions to prove its own superiority. Feminism is, of course, about difference and competing theories, about which theory and politics are going to achieve women's goals sooner and better than the others. Moreover, women's interests and priorities are constructed differently by competing feminisms. However, it is precisely for these reasons that the quality of the political culture can be regarded as the key determinant in the overall success of the feminist movement in Iran. Surely within any balance of power between the state and the opposition, an enabling feminist political culture would have a better chance of increasing the overall influence of the broad and diverse feminist collective action in Iran. An important element of an empowering feminist culture is recognition of and respect for difference. This entails the understanding that feminisms can learn from each other and that none can be free from theoretical shortcomings and political miscalculation. One often confronts arrogant displays of superiority by secularist feminists for being the originator of theories. This is accompanied by lack of acknowledgement of the important lessons and skills that Islamist feminists have learned about feminist politics over the past 20 years. Indeed, each could do with some self-criticism instead of being focused so critically on the other. For example, both feminisms have had a less than perfect legacy with respect to women's right to choose their clothes. In the 1930s, most secularist feminists kept silent about (if not condoned) the compulsory unveiling of women by the state,³⁵ and during the 1980s most Islamist feminists behaved timidly when *hejab* was forced on women.

As a political approach, pragmatic feminism advocates collaboration across feminisms, irrespective of their perceived limitations, on gender issues where interests meet and collaboration can yield results. The kind of alliance building that it is about is based on recognition of difference, not for the purpose of setting limits and drawing lines, but in order to build across differences. It tries to overcome the authoritarianism and sectarianism that have dominated feminist politics in Iran in the past two decades. What is referred to is the state of affairs where each feminism lives a secluded life in its own enclave, spending its energy attacking the other's perceived limitations, while women's rights are abrogated by the Islamist hardliners, and while the majority of the secularist and Islamist male reformists inside and outside Iran conceptualize democratization, at best, as a gender neutral process. It tries to do this by differentiating between defending or believing in Islam, and appreciating and supporting the potentials of Islamist feminism from a secular standpoint. It also tries to overcome the fear of loss of identity and ideology that has made so many feminisms disengaged and marginalized. Many secularist feminisms cannot conceptualize women holding

³⁵ This is being researched by Afsaneh Najmabadi.

multiple identities or conceive of situations in which women from different ideologies can engage in coalitional politics while maintaining, or even enhancing, their identity and ideology. That is why pragmatic feminists often face the contradictory charges of being Islamic or Western apologetics and regarded as opportunists.

However, the reality of Iran is that an alliance between secularists and Islamist feminists over specific issues at specific junctures (such as the examples given in the first part) is not a theoretical luxury but a political necessity. Since the early 1980s, increasing numbers of pragmatic feminists have tried to create an enabling feminist political culture in Iran to increase the overall effectiveness of the feminist movement. The effort has taken a number of directions. The first was to present and reflect on the efforts of the Islamist feminists and reformists to stretch the boundaries of Islamism in favour of women's rights and democratic gender relations.³⁶ There is no need to expand on this, as the content of this paper is itself a contribution in this direction. This effort has entered a new stage in which the pragmatic feminists across Islamism and secularism are jointly intervening to convince Islamist reformism to stretch its political boundaries on gender, as described in the previous section.

The second direction was to counter the essentialist, reified and ahistorical perceptions of "women's position in Islam" that prevailed in the West following the Revolution, and provide alternative concepts for the understanding and analysis of gender issues in post-revolutionary Iran. This has acquired both theoretical and political dimensions. On the theoretical front, the fallacy of confusing the Islamic texts—such as the Koran, the *hadith* and the Sharia—with the "lived experiences of individuals and local communities: actual opportunities, power, control of resources and of self, employment, education, and gender roles and relations" has been demonstrated (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:3). On the political front, the basic argument has been that feminist opposition to the Islamic Republic and its Islamization policies can only be effective (in raising support in Iran and internationally and hence influencing change) if it is based on the premises that Iranian politics is an evolving one that is as much about internal and international political power struggle as it is about Islam. Islamization in Iran is not a simple and straightforward return to "tradition" or "Sharia" that can be wished away through the withdrawal of feminists from politics or be overthrown by passionate attacks on a reified Islam. Effective opposition to Islamization is bound to involve cool headed political analysis and strategy, engagement with real women and men inside the state apparatus and in opposition, and addressing real state policies and laws (Paidar, 1995).

The third direction was to create a network of pragmatic women inside and outside Iran and convert the unconverted about the value of collaboration across the boundaries by promoting multiculturalism and democratic feminism. The journal **Nimeye Digar** ("The Other Half"), which was published in the United Kingdom and the United States by a group of pragmatic feminists, started this process in 1983. Only more recently has it become possible for the Islamist and secularist women's magazines to produce oppositional work inside the country.³⁷ Another

³⁶ See the works cited in footnote 6.

³⁷ See **Nimeye Digar** and other publications cited in footnote 6.

effort in this direction was women's studies and other conferences in Western countries that have included speakers from Iran on gender issues. These conferences have given opportunities to women in exile to establish personal links with Islamist reformists and feminists.³⁸ Many other links have been established in visits to Iran by Iranians living abroad, and there is now an international network of pragmatic feminists and pro-feminist men in place that has proved quite active in campaigning against human rights abuses against feminists and reformists in Iran.

These efforts signal the dawn of feminist coalitional politics in Iran. However, the challenges are enormous. Pragmatic feminists have a long way to go before the roots of the enabling political culture are strong enough not to get dislodged with every wind. Two examples of the current vulnerabilities within pragmatic feminism inside and outside Iran illustrate the point. The first is the persistence of the anti-democratic political culture within the discipline of Iranian women's studies. An example from this discipline outside Iran is the recent challenge by Mir-Hosseini (1999), a pragmatic feminist (under my categorization), to other pragmatic feminists (under my categorization) to declare their personal identity and explain the reasons for their evolving conceptions of "gender in Islam". She insinuates that the support of those pragmatic feminists who have not declared their identity toward Islamist feminists is not genuine but due to tactical reasons (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:6). She believes that what is going on is lack of honesty, political tactics and hidden agenda: "I often listen to colleagues, or read their writings with a strong feeling that there is a conscious or unconscious agenda beneath what is presented as objectivity" (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:4). She has declared her own identity to be that of a Muslim woman, a feminist and a social anthropologist educated and working in the West, and has invited others to declare theirs (Mir-Hosseini, 1999:11). But the fact that she has declared her identity has neither increased nor decreased the value of her analysis of gender and Islam. On the contrary, it has introduced a "political" weakness into her theoretically sound work. This weakness arises from the assumptions that (a) if an author's position evolves and changes over the years (even if the reasons are not explained) this is bound to be a sign of dishonesty, opportunism, hidden agenda or political tactics, rather than a sign of growth, toleration and pragmatism; and (b) an author's analysis of gender and Islam is only credible if she declares her personal identity. The political weakness that these assumptions lead to include undemocratic pressure on other feminists, divisiveness and undermining the cause of collaborative feminism.

Another example of the current vulnerabilities is the recent setback in the relationship between some of the secularist and Islamist feminists inside Iran over the saga of the "Berlin Conference" (Farhadpour, 2000). A mixed group of prominent feminists and reformists (mixed in terms of gender and political orientation) was invited to participate in an international conference in Germany in April 2000. The hardliners used this as an excuse to hit back at the civil society movement by issuing arrest warrants for all participants who had dared to return home. From among women, two secular women were arrested and jailed and one Islamist woman activist was fined and given a suspended sentence. The response from the Islamist women to the

³⁸ See various issues of *Nashriyeh Bonyad Pazhuheshhaye Zanan Irani* (Journal of the Iranian Women's Studies Association).

violations of the secular women's freedom was a subdued one due to the fear of reprisal by the hardliners. This resulted in disappointment and dismay among secularist women and opened up the secularist versus Islamist division among the ranks of pragmatic women who had collaborated with each other for years. Once again, women's anger was directed toward each other when state authoritarianism was the real enemy. The real issue was the conditions under which feminists were trying to build alliances, that is where participation in the public space required self-censorship and reinforcing the state imposed division of "us" and "them". The fact that women are not able to express views that are different from the official gender discourse in tone or content, and that if they do they are likely to be set up against each other, has serious ramifications for the development of genuine dialogue and constructing meaningful alliances within feminism in the Islamic Republic.

Conclusion

This paper has mapped out women's trajectory from the "Revolution" to the "civil society". Women contributed in mass scale to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, they participated in the Iran-Iraq war in great numbers, those who supported the regime remained active on its behalf, those who opposed the state found ways of showing it, for example, through a spontaneous campaign of civil disobedience over the imposed *hejab*. They gained gender awareness and formed dissident opinions through social participation, participated in education and filled the workplaces, organized themselves in women's rights and feminist groups, produced intellectual and cultural work of national and international value, continued to play a role in formal politics, as electors and elected, civil servants, critics of the state, and so on.

The paper has also explored a number of developments and trends in contemporary reformism and feminism in Iran. First, the processes that led to the development of the democratization and feminist movements. Second, the troubled relationship between these two broad and diverse movements that has led to the marginalization of gender issues and the women's movement by the mainstream reformist movement. Third, the persistence of the historical rift between the Islamist and secularist women's movements rooted in the lack of trust and solidarity between the two movements since the Revolution. The theoretic dimension of this rift has been manifested in passionate debates over the compatibility of Islam and feminism, and the universality of women's rights. These debates have proved both testing and healing for contemporary Iranian feminism. Testing, because they have brought the underlying culture of lack of tolerance of difference into the open and resulted in peer pressure against collaborative feminist politics. Healing, because they have made feminists face difficult issues and seek firm grounds to base future collaborations on.

The goal of feminist solidarity has eluded many feminist movements in the world.³⁹ However, there also exist many examples of women taking collective action under particular sets of

³⁹ See the works listed in the bibliography by Jackson and Pearson (1998), Jackson (1998), Miller and Razavi (1998), Mohanty (1991), Molyneux (2000), Philips (2000), Perseram (1994), Razavi (2000) and UNRISD (2000).

conditions and circumstances and over specific rallying issues, such as the suffrage movement in Britain and the post-revolutionary anti-Islamization protest movement in Iran. Feminist theory has made serious inroads into understanding both the barriers to and possibilities of achieving feminist alliances. These should be acknowledged and understood if feminists are to overcome marginalization. This is a more urgent requirement in the context of Iran where a particularly vicious attack has been waged on almost all aspects of women's lives, and where the only tangible internal opposition is Islamist based. In today's Iran the political choices open to both secularist and Islamist feminists are limited and unsatisfactory. Nonetheless a choice has to be made by feminists of both persuasions between withdrawal or engagement. If engagement is the answer, then collaborative efforts between Islamists and secularists over specific issues are inevitable.

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