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Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran:
The Paradox of less Rights and more Opportunities

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Women and the Iranian Revolution 1978-1979

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

1.1. The participation of women during the Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution (1978-1979), also known as the "Islamic Revolution", can be seen as a turning point in the history of Iranian society, and particularly of Iranian women. Before the revolution, only a small percentage of merely educated upper-middle class women had been participating in public movements, such as the Tobacco Protest (1891-1892) which signified women's first organized political opposition in Iranian history. This was the first of a serie of efforts that ended in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)[1]. During this movement, women organized street disorders; participated in fights; joined underground activities against foreign powers; boycotted foreign imports; participated in the destruction of a Russian bank; and raised funds for the foundation of the National Bank[2]. As a result of this struggle, some women realized their ability to organize political activities. Some decades after, women were involved in the Movement for the Nationalization of Oil (1951-1953).

The Iranian Revolution however, signified the first time that hundreds of thousands of women of all ages, socio-economic classes and statuses, religious and secular, modern and traditional, participated in the mass demonstrations against the "female friendly" regime of Muhammad Reza Shah –also known as the Pahlavi regime– and supported Ayatollah[3] Ruhollah Khomeini in his struggle to Islamize Iran. The motto "Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic" became a trademark of the revolution and the issue of women's liberation became a central aspect. Mass demonstrations used slogans against the understanding of women as "sex objects" and demanded respect and social value for women[4].

Women participated in various activities during the demonstrations. They joined men in strikes and organized protest groups; led first-aid centers; they participated in boycotts at work; took part in guerilla attacks; donated blood; and made passionate speeches[5]. In other words, women participated in all major public and private organizations. "These revolutionary women did not view themselves as separate from their male counterparts, but as compatriots joined in the struggle to overthrow the regime and set up an ideal state"[6]. To put it differently, gender segregation did not play a significant role.

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

[2]   Ali Akbar Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century long Struggle," *The Muslim World,* vol. 94 (2004): 428.

[3]   High-Ranking Cleric.

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

[5]   Ibid., 211.

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

Next to personal participation in these events, the main role women played during the revolution was that of supporting and encouraging the revolutionary movement. "Women supported and organized the oppositional activities of their families, relatives, friends and neighbors"[7]. Women moreover dealt with the deaths and injuries of the people around them and considered it therefore a revolutionary duty to contribute to the well-being of hospitals by cleaning and donating blood, among other activities. In addition, female doctors and nurses provided medical assistance. Furthermore, women often offered their houses to demonstrators being chased by the riot police. Women supported neighborhood oppositional activities, offered food to the local mosque, and protected the local militia. Moreover, they played a significant role in distribution of oppositional literature, circulation of latest BBC news and revolutionary slogans[8].

The image of Iranian women wearing a chador[9], pointing a machine gun in the air and at the same time carrying a child became one of the hallmarks of the revolution[10]. Since the image of veiled and secluded women was directly related to fear, apathy, and ignorance, the appearance of female demonstrators wearing chadors surprised the West[11]. As a result, from a Western point of view, the revolution is often characterized as traditional, conservative, and anti-modern.

From a Western perspective, veiling is directly related to traditionalism and conservativeness, and "a stereotyped image was formed that this was a symbol of their subordination to traditional religious views"[12]. However, the following statement by an Islamist female militant shows that women were veiled for different reasons: "when I started participation in the protest movement, I wore the chador. Yet by wearing it I did not intend to cover my head or body. Like many other women what I meant to do was to mark my identity. We wore the chador as a symbol of our struggle for a just society"[13]. In other words, the veil was not worn out of obligation, but rather as a symbol to show their protest against the secular policies of the Shah. Moreover, wearing the *hejab*[14] or chador became a way for women to be able to participate. Women's public presence became legitimized in this way, by making public space morally correct in the eyes of traditional Iranians[15]. In other words, imposing the *hejab* allowed women to participate more publicly and freely.

Ayatollah Khomeini moreover, fully encouraged the participation of women during the revolution. "He criticized Iranian women who imitated Westerners, but he emphasized that an Islamic government would grant women all necessary rights on the basis of Islamic law."[16] He mentioned that "any nation that has women like the Iranian women will surely be victorious"[17]. The participation of women turned out to be a key factor in Khomeini's victory. "Women's participation in protests, combined with orders to the military not to fire on demonstrators, contributed to the success of the revolution and made it relatively bloodless"[18]. In conclusion, Iranian women publically participated in great numbers for the first time in Iranian history which changed their perception on their capabilities.

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[7] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 211.

[8] Ibid., 212.

[9] *Chador* is a full-length semicircle of fabric, open down the front, which is thrown over the head and held closed in the front.

[10] Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008): 165.

[11] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 1.

[12] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 128.

[13] Ibid., 128.

[14] *Hejab* is the Arabic word for "curtain/cover", based on the root meaning "to cover, to veil, to shelter".

[15] Goli M. Rezai-Rashti, "Transcending the Limitations: Women and the Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 16, issue 2 (2007): 193.

[16] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 154.

[17] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 214.

[18] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 26.

1.1.1. Consequences of the revolution

Major consequences derived from the mass participation of women during the revolution. Women had "marched not in defense of retreat or regression but in support of a freer, more egalitarian government"[19] and therefore acquired greater self-consciousness of their own collective power. To put it differently, women were proud of their accomplishments during the revolution. As a result of their contribution to the revolution, women as social and political activists in oppositional activities became important for the first time in Iranian history because of the awareness that it gave them influence and power. "The organization, mobilization and participation features of the revolution had an important impact on the construction of the Islamic national model of modernity and the notion of womanhood that it entailed"[20]. In other words, their participation reflected integration into society and the creation of the "new woman".

Moreover, the 'new Iranian woman' became aware of her own capabilities. The following statement by an Islamist activist illustrates this growing awareness: "The authorities only needed us to demonstrate in the streets, but when the revolution triumphed they wanted to send us back to domestic work. I then realized that revolutionary social activity was meaningless when women were losing their rights, and started to defend women's rights"[21]. Perhaps the most important outcome of the revolution was the decrease of gender divisions. More specific, "the enthusiasm demonstrated by women in their struggle to transform society and expectations of society contributed to a great extent to the transformation of gender relations into a revolutionary discourse"[22]. It is argued moreover, that the Islamic Revolution brought the women's question to the forefront[23].

Mehrangiz Kar, an Iranian feminist, describes the consequences of women's participation several years after the revolution in 1998: "compared to my generation in post-revolutionary Iran, girls, especially those who belong to religious-traditional families, are very ambitious. They have goals and do everything to achieve them … Influenced by economic and religious factors, traditional structures are undergoing change. Traditional families, who, under the Shah, opposed statutory changes, saying that they corrupted women, now see religious authorities declaring that women's education or activity outside the family is compatible with religion. This new discourse is a consequence of Islamic women's participation in the revolution and war efforts and their rejection of their traditional roles"[24]. It can be concluded that the participation of women in the revolution granted women with a sense of power, self-confidence, greater respect and political influence.

1.2. Women's contribution in perspective

It is important to explain why women participated in a revolution against a regime that supposedly had benefited them. After all, before the revolution, "women were holding positions at all levels and in most professions in the public and private sectors"[25]. According to a large percentage of Iranian women, the regime of the Shah attempted to modernize the country to a great extent and therefore marginalized the role of Islam[26]. A significant part of the urban population did perhaps not devotedly practice religion, they were still truly committed to Islam

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[19] Mahnaz Afkhami, "The Women's Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 130.

[20] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 207.

[21] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran*, ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 129.

[22] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212.

[23] Goli M. Rezai-Rashti, "Transcending the Limitations: Women and the Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 16, issue 2 (2007): 194.

[24] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran*, ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 138.

[25] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 153.

[26] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 27.

values. Overall, religion was still an important aspect of loyalty to Iranian culture. In other words, "what the Shah and his modernist advisors ignored was the depth of religious feeling of many Iranians"[27]. Furthermore, despite the existence of the Family Protection Law, the majority of Iranians continued to respect Islamic Family Law[28]. These women continued to maintain traditional values by wearing the chador for instance. In other words, "many Iranians began to feel that the Shah no longer represented Iranian interests but rather had sold out to Western cultural and capitalist influences"[29]. To put it differently, Iranians were disillusioned with the Shah's rule of Iran.

It must moreover be mentioned that many laws enacted by the Shah only affected a small part of Iranian women. "For the majority of women who lived in rural areas, and for the working class and poor urban dwellers, the gains for women that resulted from the Shah's reforms were marginal"[30]. Although the Pahlavi regime encouraged women´s access to education, public participation, and developments that generally improved women´s status, "it became more hostile to political dissent regardless of gender" over time[31]. As a result, the Shah's overall political repression led to an increasing number of critical Iranians.

In summary, despite the Shah's attempts to improve the position of women, his efforts "did not substantially change the mentality of Iranians and the status of women"[32]. It can be concluded that women's involvement in the revolution and consequential social and economic changes have presumably affected women's life more than legal reforms and emancipation enforced by the Shah. This had moved them into public political behavior. In the following chapter the legal effects of the revolution on the position of women will be explained.

2. Islamic Law (*Sharia*) and the Position of Women

In this chapter the implied Islamic laws and the new Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran will be assessed. It will be evaluated to what extent these laws affected women's legal rights, both in the public and in the private sphere. In addition a discussion on different interpretations of Islam will be provided.

2.1. Sharia and the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

As a result of the revolution the Pahlavi dynasty changed to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was supported by 98 percent of the voting population. The Islamic state was created according to the rules of the *Quran*[33] and the early Islamic community of the time of the Prophet and his follower. Similar to that state, Iran became a theocracy based on the teachings of Islam. Iranian law became the will of God as revealed in the *Quran*, as it is taught by His prophet and His special emissaries, the imams[34]. As a result, the Iranian government was going to be ruled according to *sharia* (Islamic law)[35]. Ayatollah Khomeini became the country's Supreme Leader, which can be considered as the highest-ranking political and religious authority of the state.

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[27] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 27.

[28] Patricia J. Higgins, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 10, no. 3 (1985): 484.

[29] Pardis Mahdavi, *Iran's Sexual Revolution: Passionate Uprising,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 15.

[30] Roksana Bahramitash, "Revolution, Islamization, and Women's Employment in Iran," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs,* vol. 8, issue 2 (2003): 231.

[31] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 27.

[32] Asghar, Fathi, "Communities in Place and Communities in Space: Globalization and Feminism in Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 215.

[33] The *Quran*, literally considered the word of God, is the undisputed and primary source of law for Muslims.

[34] Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008): 176.

[35] *Sharia* is the body of Islamic religious law. The term means 'way' or 'path to the water source'. It is the legal framework within which the public and private aspects of life are regulated for those living a legal system based on *fiqh* (Islamic principles of jurisprudence).

The basic assumption of the new government was to reinforce an Islamic patriarchal social structure in which supremacy was granted to men and women were marginalized. Women's responsibility was, in other words, limited to the private sphere and focused on reproduction, reflected by the ideal image of Fatimah, the daughter of Mohamad, Islam's prophet[36]. Therefore, women's individuality, autonomy and independence were denied.

The new Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, approved in December 1979, was a reflection of *sharia*. The constitution did not exclude women from any basic rights, partly as a result of their active participation during the revolution. In other words, women were granted the same rights as men to public education, health, and social security[37]. However, the constitution does not elaborate women's roles and their responsibilities in society. For that, one has to turn to the writings of the leading ideologues and spokesmen of the regime, such as the Ayatollahs Nuri, Mottahari, Khomeini, and later Khamenei, for a better understanding of the role envisioned for women in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Article 20 of chapter three *The Rights of the People*, of the Iranian Constitution mentions, "all citizens of the nation, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, social, and cultural rights, in accordance with the principles of Islam"[38]. Article 21 of the same chapter is particularly addressed to women and states, "the government is obligated to ensure the rights of women in all respects, in conformity with Islamic criteria, and carry out the following, i.e. first of all the creation of a favorable environment for the growth of women's personality and the restoration of her rights, both the material and spiritual; secondly, the protection of mothers, particularly during pregnancy and childbearing, and the protection of children without guardians; thirdly, the creation of just courts to protect and preserve the family; fourthly, the creation of a special insurance for widows, older women and women without support; finally the awarding of guardianship of children to qualified mothers, in order to protect the interests of children, in absence of a legal/*sharia* approved guardian[39].

Article 3 of the constitution moreover includes that the government of the Islamic Republic has the duty of ensuring the following goals, i.e. free education and physical training for everyone at all levels, ensuring the participation of the entire people in the determination of their political, economic, social and cultural destiny and the abolition of all forms of impermissible discrimination and the provision of just opportunities for all, in both material and non-material matters. Furthermore, article 30 points out that the government must provide all citizens with free education to the end of middle school, and must expand higher education to the level required by the country for self-sufficiency[40].

In short, Islamic ideology reflected by *sharia* propagates the equality of men and women, but at the same time the physical and emotional differences that require different responsibilities. Moreover, as demonstrated by the constitution, men and women are equal "in conformity with Islamic criteria" which enables the government and clerics to interpret laws according to their preferences.

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[36]   Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society,* vol. 16, no. 4 (2003): 559.

[37]   Amir Mehryar, Gholamali Farjadi, and Mohammad Tabibian, Labor-Force Participation of Women in Contemporary Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic,* ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 186.

[38]   Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[39]   Ibid.

[40]   Ibid.

2.2. Veiling

In the Islamic Republic, women are required to wear the *hejab*. This in contrast to the years under the Shah's regime, when veiling was prohibited by law and women were forced to adopt Western clothes[41]. Women are not obligated to wear the *chador*, but in government offices they have to respect an Islamic dress code, namely a hidden robe and scarf[42]. In other words, veiling was reinforced in the Islamic Republic of Iran and known as an approach to cleanse the workplace. This did not only include the compulsion of the *hejab* on female employees, but also gender segregation, discharging non-Islamic employees, and replacing secular employees in important jobs with Muslims[43]. A law of Islamic punishment was moreover introduced regarding lashing and stoning in case of violation of "Islamic concepts of decency"[44]. This is reflected by article 102 of the constitution: "women who appear on street and in public without the prescribed *hejab* will be condemned to 74 strokes of the lash"[45].

It must be taken into consideration however, that from a Western point of view, the veil represents seclusion, gender segregation, modesty, and subordination, while Muslim women affirm that the veil "liberates and protects them from the sexual harassment that permeates Western societies"[46].

2.3. From Family Protection Law to *Sharia* Family Law

The Family Protection Law, first passed in 1967 and revised by the Shah in 1975, gave women the right to appeal to divorce based on the same rules as men. A special family court was responsible for decisions concerning child custody and alimentation. The mother was recognized as the child's legal guardian in case of death of the father. Moreover, polygamy was practically eliminated by setting out specific conditions. Besides, legal marriages to a second wife were hereby only permitted with permission of the first wife. Furthermore, the minimum age of marriage was increased to eighteen for women and twenty-one for men. Also abortion was made legal with the approval of the husband. Moreover, unmarried women could have abortions up to the eighth week of the pregnancy[47].

Only two weeks after the revolutionary government came to power, the suspension of the Family Protection Law was announced. Instead, family law based on *sharia* was reinforced. The new family law implied that men were again able to divorce their wives without the decision of the family court. Moreover, child custody was automatically given to men. Also the legal minimum age at marriage for women was lowered to thirteen, and polygamy was again affirmed legal without the need of permission of the first wife. Yet, a man still needed court concession to marry a second woman and a woman could still appeal the court for a divorce based on her husband's lack of support, abandonment or mistreatment[48]. Consequently, the new family law made it more difficult for women to protect their power in relation to men in the family.

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[41] Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 376.

[42] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 154.

[43] Pooya Aleadini and Mohamad Reza Razavi, "Women's Participation and Employment in Iran: A Critical Examination," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 14 issue 1 (2005): 61.

[44] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 155.

[45] Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[46] Mitra K. Shavarini. "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *Review of Education,* vol. 51 (2005): 333.

[47] Mahnaz Afkhami, "The Women's Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 132.

[48] Patricia J. Higgins, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 10, no. 3 (1985): 480.

2.4. Islamic law related to women in the public sphere

The Iranian Constitution includes the following about women in the public sphere, "in the creation of Islamic foundations, all the human forces which had been in the service of general foreign exploitation will recover their true identity and human rights. In doing so, women who have endured more tyranny up till now under idolatrous order, will naturally vindicate their rights further". To put it differently, women's role is best limited to the private sphere. The constitution therefore, emphasizes the role of women in the private sphere, "the family unit is the cornerstone of society, and the primary institution for the growth and improvement of the individual. Harmony of beliefs and aspirations in setting up the family is the true foundation of the movement towards the development and growth of mankind. This has been a fundamental principle. Providing the opportunities for these objectives to be reached is on of the duties of the Islamic Government. Women were drawn away from the family unit under the Shah's regime and (put into) the condition of "being a mere thing", or "being a mere tool for work" in the service of consumerism and exploitation. Re-assumption of the task of bringing up religiously-minded men and women, ready to work and fight together in life's fields of activity, is a serious and precious duty of motherhood. And so acceptance of this responsibility as more serious and–from the Islamic point of view– a loftier ground for appreciation and status will be forthcoming"[49].

Yet, at the same time, article 28 states that "everyone has the right to choose any employment he or she wishes, if it is not opposed to Islam, the public interest, or to the right of others. The government has the duty to provide every citizen with the opportunity to work, and to create equal conditions for obtaining it[50]. Moreover, women have the right to vote in parliamentary and other local and national elections and can stand for candidates for almost all selected positions. "They are basically unlimited to active participation in the private job market, and they can apply for and hold all positions and functions offered by the public sector."[51] Nonetheless, the constitution did not allow women to become president and it restricted women from becoming judges. "In the civil service, some women (like some of their male counterparts) were purged, dismissed, or pressured into early retirement"[52]. This is reflected by article 115 and article 162, which include the condition for the presidential candidates and for the attorney general, respectively. Article 115 declares that "the President must come from among the religious and political statesmen (*rejal*)"[53]. Article 162 asserts moreover, that "the head of justice department and attorney general must be a '*mojtahed*'[54], honest, and knowledgeable in legal subject matters".

By means of the new constitution, the state attempted to limit women at the labor market, except for professions such as teaching and health-related services that were important for the state's policy of gender segregation. However, it is argued that, with the possible exception of the legal profession, no explicit *Quranic* rules prohibit women from participating in the labor market. In fact, the *Quran* approves working women when they earn fair wages. The lives of the Prophet Mohamad's first and highly appreciated wife Khadijeh, a merchant, and his granddaughter Zeinab, who showed extraordinary courage and publicly challenged the ruler Yazid, can be used as examples signifying that Islam allows women's involvement in the public sphere[55].

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[49]   Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[50]   Ibid.

[51]   Amir Mehryar, Gholamali Farjadi, and Mohammad Tabibian, Labor-Force Participation of Women in Contemporary Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 186.

[52]   Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 154.

[53]   The word *rejal* literally means men of high achievement.

[54]   Doctor in Islamic Jurisprudence who is able to issue decree.

[55]   Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran", in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004),166.

Not only men, but also women active in the government, argue that legislation related to women's rights in the public sphere has to be in harmony with *sharia*, although their understanding of these laws sometimes differ from their male colleagues. In 1982 for instance, the government presented a draft labor law to the *majlis*[56] regarding half-time work for women in the civil service. Article 54 proposed, "married women can be employed for jobs which do not interfere with their family responsibilities. In cases where a married woman's work results in infringement of her husbands' matrimonial rights, employment should be conditional to obtaining her husband's permission"[57]. Female members all supported it, but some male colleagues voted against it, arguing that women should not be in the workplace. In fact, they argued that the role of women in society would be better at home. Miriam Behrouzi, one of the female members in the *majlis* responded that women could indeed be a contributive force in society by contributing to the labor force and that the country should make full use of them. More important, the bill, according to her, was in compliance with the constitution. In particular, it gave women the chance to work and also be responsible for the family. The bill was enacted to law in November 1983, a year after it was presented to the *majlis*[58].

In this context it can be concluded that the constitution does not seclude women from the public sphere, although state legislation does encourage a patriarchal family structure in which women stay at home. Overall, the state has been more concerned with enforcing gender division of labor at work than banning women collectively from the labor force. However, the state has not reached a consensus on this issue and the debate about the position of women in the public sphere between different factions of the Islamic elite continues.

2.5. Different interpretations of Islam

As any other religion, Islam is subject to various interpretations. "Since the interpretation of the text is social by nature and depends on the community of experts, like all leaned activities it will be an independent dynamic entity, abstracting from individual interpreters"[59]. Examples in previous paragraphs illustrate the complicated nature of Islam and *sharia* and demonstrate that various understandings are possible. After the revolution moreover, Iranian men and women who studied early Islamic history realized that much of what they learned about Islam was composed of interpretations by past and present religious leaders. Their study of the *Quran* and early texts showed that early Muslim women had played more various and active roles in society than what was presented by religious leaders in the Islamic Republic of Iran. After all, during the Shah's regime, Dr. Ali Shariati, intellectual and Professor in Sociology provided an earlier generation of Islamist women with a revolutionary role model in Fatimah[60]. In this view, Islamic teaching does not necessarily have to be opposed to women's rights and equality. "For 1.400 years, discriminatory interpretations of women have been produced; these aren't religion, but interpretations of religion"[61].

It is moreover argued, that the *Quran* does not recommend the veil to women, although it does recommend a pure and decent appearance to women. Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Sani'I[62] for instance declared that Islam does not prohibit women from becoming judges. In addition, Ayatollah Mar'ashi, the head of the penal laws

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[56]   Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[57]   Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 327.

[58]   Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88", in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 155.

[59]   Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 382.

[60]   Guity Nashat, "Introduction", in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 32.

[61]   Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 383.

[62]   Only few of the most important ayatollahs are granted the title Grand Ayatollah.

revision committee argued that according to the existing laws women could become judges[63]. Taking this into account, one can question the fact that *sharia* is fully compatible with the teachings of the *Quran*. Even *sharia* itself is subject to many different perceptions.

There does not seem to be much argument about the basic distinction between men and women concerning family. More specific, there appears to be consensus on the issue that women are responsible for a child's well being. Despite the fact that this view does not automatically exclude any participation of women in the public sphere, the public role of women is subject to controversial discussions. There are scholars moreover, who argue that Islam is a dynamic religion and should be adapted to the realities of Iranian society. And in this society, women have become active in economic, social, and political activities. [64] This will be elaborated in the second part of this study.

It can be concluded that, compared to laws under the Shah's regime, *sharia* laws generally limit women's legal rights both in the private and the public sphere of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is a result of a conservative interpretation of Islam and the new Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran created by the government. Therefore, it has to be mentioned that although it appears complicated to change laws, given the interpretative character of Islam, the system is overall subject to change. In the following chapter Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretations will be illustrated and the changes for women in the Islamic Republic of Iran will be examined.

3. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Changes for Women

In the previous chapter it has been demonstrated that the new Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran based on *sharia* laws decreased women's legal rights. Since the constitution does not elaborate the role of women, and given that Islam is subject to many interpretations, it is important to understand how the revolutionary government interpreted the new constitution. In this chapter it will be shown how Ayatollah Khomeini envisioned *sharia* and how women were confronted with a dual role in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

3.1. Islamized Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini's perception of women

During and immediately after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini promised women real freedom, equality and dignity. He often emphasized that, "as for women, Islam has never been against their freedom. It is, to the contrary, opposed to the idea of woman-as-object and it gives her back her dignity. A woman is man's equal; she and he are both free to choose their lives and their occupations"[65]. It became evident however, that this perception changed not long after the revolution.

Khomeini specified his understanding of the position of women according to *sharia* in his work *Tawzih al-Masa'el*[66]. First of all, a girl attains legal majority at the age of nine, which makes her eligible to be married off by her legal guardians, i.e. father or grandfather. Her marriage may be permanent or temporary. Her husband may have three other permanent wives and as many temporary wives as he wishes. Secondly, a woman contracted in a permanent marriage to a man must not leave the house without her husband's permission and must resign herself to him so he can acquire any pleasure he desires. If she obeys her husband in these respects, he must provide her with food, clothing, housing, and other furnishings specified in books of *sharia*. Thirdly, a woman can only marry one man. Fourth, a woman may divorce only in cases where a man does not meet the requirements determined by *sharia*. A man on the other hand, may divorce his wife whenever he wants. Fifth, in case of divorce (even if decided by the man) a woman will be able to keep her children only for

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[63]   Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran", in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 136.

[64]   Ibid., 135.

[65]   Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 214.

[66]   Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Iranian Studies,* vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008): 184.

a limited period of time, her sons until the age of two, and her daughters until the age of seven. Sixth, women will not be permitted to pursue careers in the legal profession and cannot be judges. Seventh, women will be discouraged from entering politics or the legislature, since they lack intellectual ability and critical judgment, which are required by these kind of professions. Finally, women will be encouraged to be active in the private sphere, since the specific task and duty of women in society is to marry and bear children.

As mentioned previously, similar to what the Iranian Constitution embodies, Ayatollah Khomeini's perception does not imply that women are not allowed to work according to Islam, but their primary responsibilities are work and duties at home, which stresses their role of motherhood. Therefore work outside of the house should not interfere with women's main responsibilities and has to be approved by a woman's husband.

3.2. Tradition versus modernity: a dual role

Iranian society is historically patriarchal which suggests that women do not play an active role in society. Therefore, according to the traditional role, women are restrained to the private sphere. Post-1979 Iran can be described as an Islamized, revolutionary, and modernizing society. As explained in the previous chapter, an Islamized society is characterized by politicized Islam governing both the private and the public lives of individuals. The strict enforcement of *sharia* in all spheres of life and the rule of religious authorities is what differentiates Iran from other Muslim countries. As a result, most outside observers consider Iran as a predominantly traditional society. The reality is however, that Iranian society is characterized by both traditional and modern forces. The authority over *sharia* and the reconfirmation of the Islamic identity have led to conscious reawakening of traditional values, beliefs and practices. On the other hand, consciousness of the importance of industrialization and technical progress has motivated to modernize.[67] Nevertheless, Iranian modernization cannot be equalized to Westernization.

This duality of tradition and modernity is reflected by women and the Islamic Republic provided them with a double role. The ideal Iranian woman is one who acts according to the traditional, Islamized society, while preparing herself for the difficulties of modernization and the demands of a revolutionary society. Therefore, the "new Muslim Woman" is one who understands her responsibilities primarily in the family. Meanwhile, she is expected to be a responsible member of society, participating in socio-political matters, and acting as a "soldier of the revolution"[68]. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, in the 1960s Dr. Ali Shariati began to offer women a modern perspective. He became remarkably popular by presenting them a new image of Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammad. "She combined all the feminine virtues: modesty, education, courage, patience and understanding"[69]. Fatimah, who represented helplessness, forbearance, and suffering in the traditional image, was remodeled into a representation that was both familiar and inspirational. In his reading Shariati argued that the contemporary image of women as creatures subordinate and inferior to man, needing to be shut off from society, did not have its roots in the teachings of the Islam but in the cultural traditions of the region[70]. Moreover, he urged his readers to remember the true image of Fatimah. "She had stood up to injustice, without fear or compromise, in defense of her rights and her perception of the truth". [71] It has to be understood that this image did not change after the revolution.

[67]   Golnar Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: a Paradox of Tradition and Modernity," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 71.

[68]   Ibid., 71.

[69]   Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic,* ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 173.

[70]   Ibid., 173.

[71]   Ibid., 173.

3.3. Opportunities and possibilities

Although it has been explained in previous chapters that the implementation of *sharia* together with its interpretation by the revolutionary government indicated less legal rights for women, paradoxically this has made "women major protagonists of social, cultural and political change, regardless of their social and political stands"[72]. This is also reflected by an increasing number of women in the public sphere. For instance, the privileges granted to men, especially their right to divorce and polygamy caused concerns among women which resulting into many seeking a job to become financially independent[73].

It can furthermore be argued that the policies of the Iranian government have not aimed to ban women entirely from public life and to keep them uneducated. Although the Islamized Iranian society considers motherhood as an important value and emphasizes its importance in protecting stability in the family, according to the needs of a revolutionary and modernizing society, women were encouraged to participate in socio-economic and political development, simply out of necessity[74]. Therefore, "the status of Iranian women has improved, in spite of discrimination by the Islamic regime since 1979"[75].

In the book *Iran Achter de Schermen: Mullahs en Meisjes* (Iran Behind the Scenes: Mullahs and Girls), Middle East correspondent of prominent Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* Carolien Roelants includes several interviews she had with different Iranian girls. Student Zahra argues, "the Islamic system offers freedom". "But it depends on the way the government deals with Islamic laws". In her opinion, the government often misinterprets the Islam. "For me, the Islamic Republic signifies freedom, independence, freedom of speech, freedom of clothing, and a liberal environment for men and women"[76]. In fact, for some women, the Islamic Republic of Iran represents more opportunities. The problem seems not to be Islam itself, but the conservative interpretation of it.

Feminist Mehrangiz Kar stresses the importance of women's participation during the revolution and how this has created more possibilities in the public sphere. She argues in *Iran Times (*1998): "Their (women) political involvement in the revolution and war efforts led to the strengthening of the Islamic regime. Yet, it simultaneously legitimized the demands of these women for the recognition of their social role, and they succeeded in forcing the power elite to officially recognize this"[77].

In can be concluded that as a result of the interpretative character of Islam, the perceptions of Ayatollah Khomeini have been important in shaping the role of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nevertheless, women have been granted a dual role, in which their primary responsibility has been in the private sphere, but they are also expected to participate in the public sphere to a certain extent. In other words, a 'New Muslim Women' was created in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore it can be argued that despite the fact that new *sharia* laws decreased women's legal rights, their real opportunities in the Islamic Republic of Iran have increased. Specific possibilities and opportunities will be elaborated in the following chapters. First the Islamized educational system and consequences on women's access to education will be examined.

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[72] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 140.

[73] Ibid., 138.

[74] Golnar Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: a Paradox of Tradition and Modernity," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 72.

[75] Asghar Fathi, "Communities in Place and Communities in Space: Globalization and Feminism in Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 215.

[76] Carolien Roelants, *Iran Achter de Schermen: Mullahs en Meisjes,* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008), 72.

[77] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 138.

Part II
Women's Empowerment: Historic, Social, and Economic Factors

4. Women and Education

In this chapter women's access to education in the years between the Iranian Revolution and 2004 will be discussed. First an overview of the developments that have been taking place over the years will be provided. Then the measures taken by the Iranian government in order to change the educational system in the Islamic Republic of Iran will be elaborated, and this will be compared to the system under the Shah. Finally, the effects of the educational system of the Islamic Republic of Iran will be assessed.

4.1. Women and education between 1979 and 2004

Education plays a principal role in the development of a society and in this case in the empowerment of Iranian women. "It is only through the acquisition of knowledge and education that a society can face challenges to its cultural values and moral principles"[78]. In other words, education is fundamental in order to generate social progress and reform. Under the Pahlavi regime, women had been encouraged to study, and a modern educational system was introduced and applied to secularize the state. However, access to the public educational system was restricted and the growth has been slow, especially in rural areas[79].

Also the Islamic government regarded education to be a substantial method of women's integration into society and has therefore greatly expanded educational opportunities for women[80]. However, in contrast to the secular system under the Shah, this educational system had to be constructed according to Islamic rules and values. As a result, the government became responsible for providing universal primary education, and new schools were built. Consequently, the availability of schools even in small villages and a new Islamic approach to the educational system led to a decrease of cultural barriers against girls' education[81]. At home, the mother became the child's teacher of Islamic values and political culture and in society the school played this role of transmitter. Moreover, women's participation in educational institutions was needed.

Not only did women have to educate the younger generations in both private and public sphere, also women themselves had to be educated. Ayatollah Khomeini was remarkably open about the urgency to educate women and made literacy a religious duty for both men and women[82]. He supported women's education by telling them, "you (women) should endeavor for knowledge and piety. Knowledge is not the monopoly of a particular group but belongs to all and it is the duty of all men and women to acquire knowledge. I hope authorities will assist you in this and provide the educational and cultural facilities that you need to enable you to succeed"[83]. The majority of Iranian society shared this support.

Women's education was especially important because the Islamic educational system ideologically prepared women to become appropriate participants in social, economic and political activities. "Today the reasons

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[78]   Adele K. Ferdow, "Women and the Islamic Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* no. 2 (1983): 286.

[79]   Shaditalab Jaleh, "Iranian Women: Rising Expectations," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 14, issue 1 (2005): 38.

[80]   Charles Kurzman, "A Feminist Generation in Iran?" *Iranian Studies,* vol. 41 (2008): 298.

[81]   Shaditalab Jaleh, "Iranian Women: Rising Expectations," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 14, issue 1 (2005): 43.

[82]   Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society,* vol. 16, no. 4 (2003): 561.

[83]   Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 313.

for women's participation in society and the economy are different from those of the previous regime. In the past women were exploited. Now women work in response to specific needs of the Islamic society. Women experts and politicians are needed to cater for women's needs in an Islamic society"[84].

4.2. The Islamized educational system in Iran

Although the Islamic regime encouraged education, educational measures were undertaken in order to Islamize the system. First of all, co-education at all levels in schools was banned, except at universities. Secondly, teachers were segregated, so that only female teachers would teach in girls' schools and male teachers in boys' school. Thirdly, from the age of six, veiling was compulsory at girls' schools. Fourthly, school textbooks were explicitly gender stereotyped, in which a clear division of labor was pointed out between men and women, i.e. women in the private sphere and men in the public sphere[85].

Regarding higher education, before the revolution women were admitted to all study fields except mining. Generally, during the years after the revolution, women's access to higher education did not change. However, the Islamization of the higher education system during the politically extremist period between 1980 and 1984 led to restrictive policies towards women's admission to "non-feminine" areas. In other words, women were accepted to most medical, environmental and human sciences, but their admission was limited by a maximum number of places for women, which varied from 20 to 50 percent. Also higher education abroad demonstrated to be problematic for women. A *majlis* bill on this topic was ratified in 1985, which prevented married female students from participating in foreign exchange programs unless their husbands would join them. This did not affect married men. On the contrary, the gender division of study fields did apply to men who were prohibited from subjects such as midwifery, family hygiene and sewing. Moreover, men were accepted to nursery, but their admission was also limited to a maximum admission number of 50 per cent.

In the late 1980s however, policies on women's enrollment in higher education became less limited and earlier prohibited fields became accessible[86]. Moreover, since 2001, single women are allowed again to study abroad. In contemporary Iran, women have regained equal access to all subjects and studies, and at the university level they are successful in business, technical and science majors. Furthermore, the gender gap has been reduced at all levels of education.

4.3. Consequences of the Islamized system on women's access to education

The number of educated women has been growing steadily since the Iranian Revolution. To put it differently, the Islamization of Iran has been of great importance in increasing female enrollment in higher education. "Whereas many parents hesitated to allow their daughters to attend or to continue with school before the rise of the Islamic Republic, they trusted the new regime"[87]. Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate the evolution of literacy and show that by 1976, 35 percent of all females aged fifteen and above were literate, whereas this number has increased to 76.8 percent in 2004. Moreover, an overwhelming increase in literacy rates among children and youths of lower class origins is noticeable. Furthermore, in 2001, regarding literacy in urban and rural areas among the age group 6-24, in urban areas the male literacy rate was 97 percent and the female literacy rate was 96 percent. In rural areas this rate is 93 percent and 83 percent respectively[88].

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[84]   Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 313.

[85]   Golnar Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: a Paradox of Tradition and Modernity," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 69.

[86]   Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 321.

[87]   Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 32.

[88]   Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 140.

Today, Iranian schools in general have a more open character than a quarter of a century ago, and offer more opportunities for initiative, leadership and performance[89]. In 2003 moreover, 93 percent of all Iranian girls were enrolled at primary school level, which is exceeding the Middle East and North Africa regional average of 76 percent[90].

Table 1. Female Literacy

Year	Female literates as a % of all Females Age 15 and Above
1976	35
1986	52
1999	74
2004	76.8

Source: Iran Statistical Yearbook 1978, 2000 & 2006

Figure 1. Female Literacy
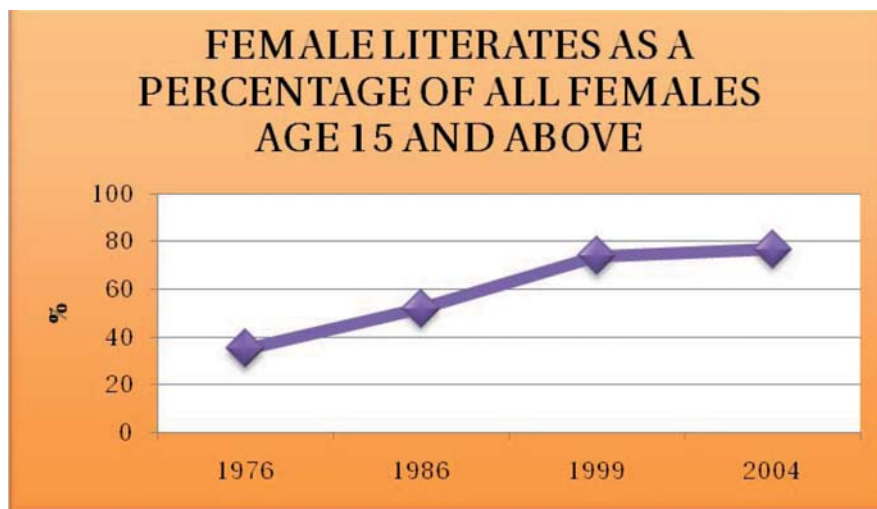
Source: Iran Statistical Yearbook 2000 & 2006

Table 2 and Figure 2 indicate the percentage of female students of ten years and older which has increased from 15 percent in 1976 to 17, 22, and 27 percent for 1986, 1991, and 1996, respectively[91].

Table 2. Female Students

Year	Female Students as a % of all Females Age 10 and Above
1976	15
1986	17
1991	22
1996	27

Source: Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, 2004

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[89] Mary Elaine Hegland. "Educating Young Women: Culture, Conflict, and New Identities in the Iranian Village," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 42 (2009): 54.

[90] Golnar Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: a Paradox of Tradition and Modernity," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 70.

[91] Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 175.

Figure 2. Female Students

FEMALE STUDENTS AS A
PERCENTAGE OF ALL FEMALES
AGE 10 AND ABOVE

Table 3, Figure 3, and Figure 4 illustrate the numbers and percentages of male and female students admitted to public universities. It shows that whereas men outnumbered women in the academic year 1999-2000, in 2003-2004 female students outnumbered male students in public universities. Moreover, whereas women made up 30 percent of the student population in 1978 at the university level of both public and private universities, [92] in 2003, 62 percent of the university freshmen[93] were female. They consisted furthermore of 50 percent of all graduate students and a third of all doctoral degrees were granted to women[94].

Table 3. Students admitted to Public Universities

Academic Year	Male	Percentage Male	Female	Percentage Female	Total
1999-2000	84,386	51.68	78,898	48.32	163,284
2000-2001	87,863	49.5	89,802	50.5	177,665
2001-2002	98,589	48.09	106,437	52	205,026
2002-2003	104,109	47.1	116,927	53	221,036
2003-2004	120,399	46.06	141,002	54	261,401

Source: Pooya Alaedini & Mohamad Reza Razavi, 2005

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[92] Mahnaz Afkhami, "The Women's Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 131.

[93] First-year students.

[94] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 34.

Figure 3. Number of Students Admitted to Public Universities
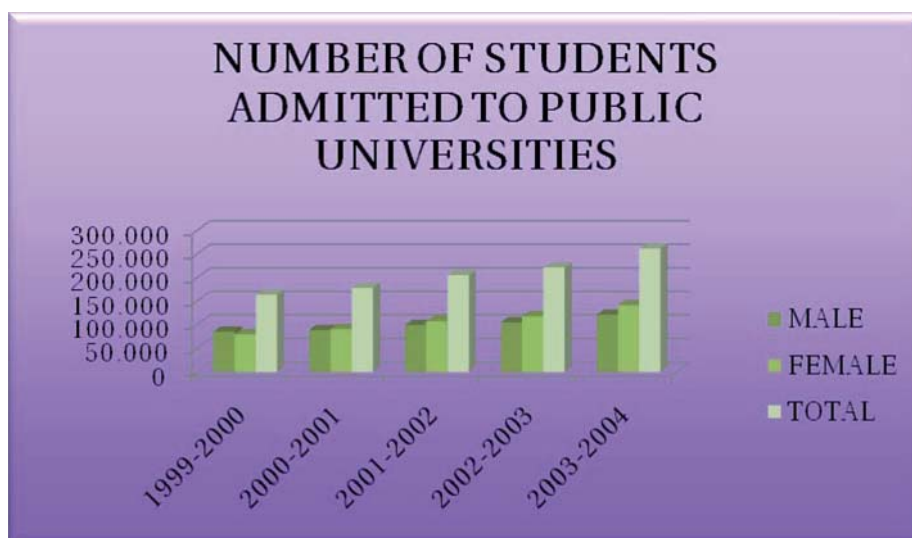
Source: Pooya Alaedini & Mohamad Reza Razavi, 2005

Figure 4. Percentage of Students Admitted to Public Universities
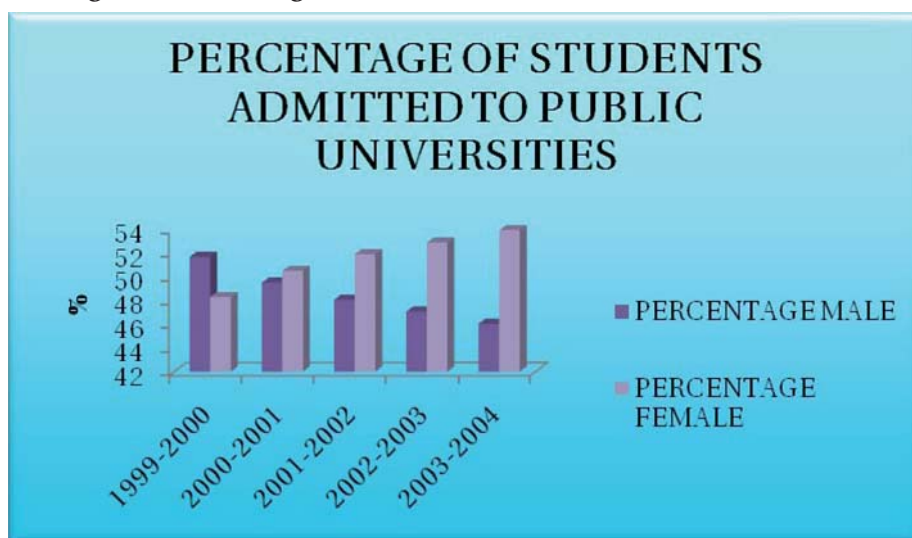
Source: Pooya Alaedini & Mohamad Reza Razavi, 2005

In addition, out of the 1.5 million students taking entrance exams to universities in 2002, approximately 60 percent were women[95]. Despite the traditional measures taken by the Islamic government, these numbers have been growing since the Revolution.

Nowadays, women are a visible force at university campuses in Iran. "Their *mantua* (Islamic uniforms) are often tight, short, and revealing; their decorative headdresses expose hair. Black pencil might heavily line their eyes, rouge be painted across their cheeks, and a rainbow of colors glossing their lips"[96]. In conclusion, a significant increase of female students at all levels of the educational system is evident after the Iranian Revolution which indicates that the Islamization of education provides more educational opportunities for women.

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[95] Ramesh Sepehrad, "The Role of Women in Iran's New Popular Revolution," *Brown Journal of World Affairs,* vol. 9, issue 2 (2003): 222.

[96] Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *Review of Education,* vol. 51 (2005): 330.

4.3.1. Effects of women's increasing education

Women's increasing access to education has some significant effects, both on women as individuals and on the Iranian society as a whole. First of all, "education leads to women's awareness of their own accomplishments and abilities in comparison to the average Iranian man"[97]. Literacy as a consequence, has contributed to the weakening of parental authority and the strengthening of youth's authority within families. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the gap between rural and urban areas has reduced as a result of increasing literacy rates among the younger generation in both areas.

In particular, education can play a crucial role in women's labor force behavior. It seems that with an increasing level of education, women's overall public participation will increase as well.[98] Contrary to the years prior to the revolution, when educated women were not necessarily involved in economic activity after graduation but rather used their educational experience as cultural essentials to serve their role in the private sphere, women now tend to work after they obtained their diploma[99]. This is necessary in order to overcome the obstacles of structural inequality in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Moreover, increased access to education has led to changing attitudes among young Iranian women. Both in larger cities, in smaller cities and rural areas where women move to cities and live independent from their families in order to attend college[100]. As a result of their access to universities, Iranian women gain respect and acquire independence. It may be concluded that Iranian women have found the way to empowerment by enforcing their knowledge and awareness through education. The following chapter will illustrate how women have used their empowerment in the workforce and how economic and social changes in Iranian society have given women the possibility to be more active participants in the public sphere.

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[97] Asghar, Fathi, "Communities in Place and Communities in Space: Globalization and Feminism in Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 218.

[98] Hossein Mahmoudian, "Socio-Demographic Factors Affecting Women's Labor Force Participation in Iran, 1976-96," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol.15, issue 3 (2006): 235.

[99] Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: the Weakening of Patriarchal Order," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 38, issue 1 (2005): 48.

[100] Roksana Bahramitash and Shahla Kazemipour, "Myths and Realities of the Impact of Islam on Women: Changing Marital Status in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 15, issue 2 (2006): 120.

5. Women and Labor Force Participation

In this chapter the development of women in the workforce between 1979 and 2007 will be evaluated. Furthermore the economic and cultural factors that have been determining in the increase of employed Iranian women.

5.1. Women and employment between 1979 and 2007

"Labor force participation is commonly acknowledged as one of the main pillars of women's status and employment"[101]. During the last two decades prior to the Iranian Revolution, as the economy began to expand at a very high rate as a consequence of the increasing oil production, female employment opportunities increased, "and as women's role in society changed, so did societal attitudes toward them"[102] Female employment also increased during these years as a result of the modernization policies of the Shah and laws under his regime guaranteed equal salaries for equal work[103]. More specific, in the eve of the revolution, few occupations excluded women and they were working as judges, diplomats, cabinet officers, mayors,governors, policewomen and in health and education sectors[104].

As explained in chapter two, the new Islamic government had clearly expressed the ideal vision of women in the private sphere. The increasing number of women's employment therefore concerned them and women were regularly reminded that motherhood was their primary duty in Iranian society. According to Ayatollah Khomeini: "the foreign lackeys tried to divert this respectable section of society (women) who are instrumental in shaping society by turning them into toys in corrupt hands. A mother's primary service to society is something else: that women should rear lions and lionesses to offer to Islamic society"[105].

As a result of new strict *sharia* laws and government policies that stressed women's position in the private sphere, one would expect a sharp decline of women in the job market after the Iranian Revolution. According to Table 4 and Figure 5 however, paid female labor increased after the revolution despite all barriers. Moreover, it is also indicated, that the growth of women in the labor force has been significantly faster than during the regime of the Shah[106].

In fact, as explained in chapter two, the Iranian government encouraged gender segregation, which, most likely unintended, resulted in the creation of new job opportunities for women. For instance, "because all girls attending middle and high schools were expected to be taught by female teachers, more space and resources were devoted to training women as teachers"[107]. In other words, as the numbers indicate, "the overall impact of state policy did not do much to force women out of the labor market"[108]. More important,

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[101] Amir Mehryar, Gholamali Farjadi, and Mohammad Tabibian, "Labor-Force Participation of Women in Contemporary Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 182.

[102] Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008): 168.

[103] Patricia J. Higgins, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 10, no. 3 (1985): 438.

[104] Mahnaz Afkhami, "The Women's Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 131.

[105] Parvin Paider, *Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 323.

[106] Studies on female labor force participation after the revolution in the Islamic Republic of Iran generally show decreasing participation rates. These studies are based on the national data of Iran. However, international data gathered by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva and the World Bank give different outcomes by applying more elaborate data processing methods. They are moreover aware of the problem of underreporting of female employment. Therefore they usually do not only use national data but also conduct small-scale surveys to get a more correct picture of female employment. (Interview with previous head of ILO statistical bureau, Dr. Mehran. See: Bahramitash, 2003: 559) In addition, recent study has pointed out, that a large segment of active female labor is not reported in the official statistics of Iran. (For more elaborated results see Moghadam, 2009). Therefore, the data concerning labor force participation in this paper is based on international statistical centers.

[107] Amir Mehryar, Gholamali Farjadi, and Mohammad Tabibian, "Labor-Force Participation of Women in Contemporary Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 187.

[108] Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society,* vol. 16, no. 4 (2003): 559.

it has to be mentioned that the percentage of Iranian female employment in 2007 (41.9 %) was higher than the average of all Middle Eastern Countries (33.8 %)[109].

Table 4. Female Employment

Year	Female Labor % of Total Active Female Population
1960	17.9
1965	18.45
1970	19.0
1975	19.7
1980	20.4
1985	20.6
1990	21.2
1993	23
1995	24.2
1998	25.94
1999	26.5
2000	33.1
2004	39.1
2007	41.9

Source: World Development Indicators Databases 2001 & 2009

Figure 5. Female Labor as a Percentage of the Total Active Female Population
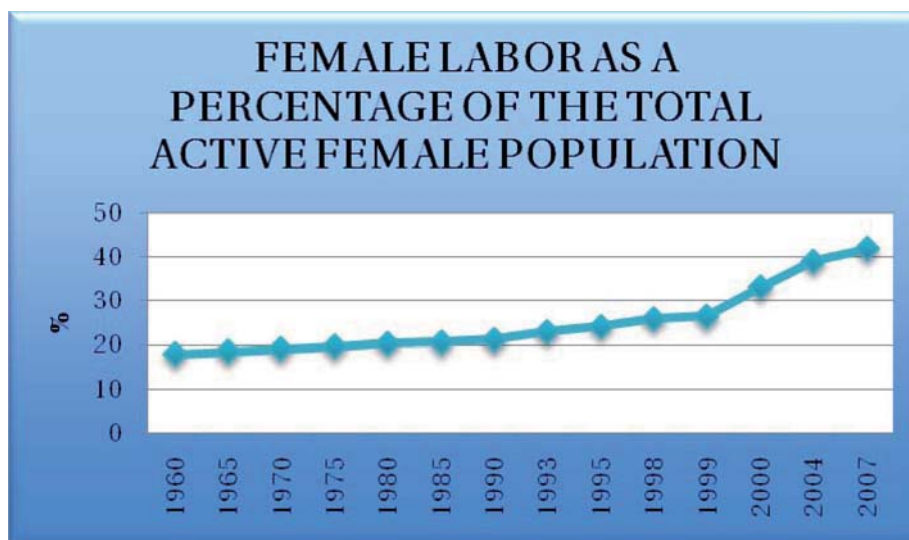
Source: World Development Indicators Databases 2001 & 2009

On top of these numbers, it has to be understood, that official statistics only include the activity of women in the formal sector of the economy. A growing number of women however, are active in the informal sector without being included in official statistics. As a result, these women have obtained financial independence and actively participate. Besides, there seems to be a great number of underreported female employment in Iran, realized both by women themselves and by the government, mainly as a result of cultural factors such as

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[109] World Development Indicators Database 2009.

religious ideology expressed by the government and tax avoidance. This indicates that the numbers provided above can be higher in reality[110]. "Although the Islamic regime preferred to keep women in the household, and initially, underreported their labor force participation in the census statistics, with their presence in the economy and the educational system, women have begun to pose indirect challenges to those political and social taboos that uphold motherhood and wifehood as women's primary and only responsibility"[111].

It is important to take into consideration that societal attitudes towards women in the public sphere already changed under the regime of the Shah. This explains the fact that even though Islamic laws together with the rulings of the Islamic government prevented women from being active in the public sphere, their activity increased. Moreover, next to jurisprudence, economic and cultural factors also affect labor participation, i.e. the Iran-Iraq war; the increasing access to education as explained in chapter four; the decline of women's fertility rate; the increased age of marriage for women; urbanization and population growth[112]. Compared to legal restrictions, these factors seem to be more substantial in the change of women's role in the public sphere. They will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

5.2. Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, factories and hospitals lacked professional, educated and skilled employees which remained unchanged throughout the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. Many women –a great number from low-income and traditional families– supported the war and they were mobilized by the Islamic regime. "Khomeini made various speeches during the war to promote women's supporting role in the war"[113]. Given the state's patriarchal points of view regarding women, this encouragement was remarkable.

One reason for this support can be found in the uncontrollable circumstances as a result of the war. Consequently, the regime was forced to change their attitudes. Another explanation for this sudden change is related to the emigration of many professionals and the massive mobilization of men during the war. This required women to fill gaps in the labor force[114].

The regime encouraged women in the first place to participate in the war as nurses. In the meantime, despite its initial statement that women should be secluded from certain high positions, the war circumstances also offered women to continue their positions as engineers, doctors, managers, and office workers.[115] Women were moreover recruited as revolutionary guards and mobilized into the Mobilization of the Disinherited (*Basij Mostazafin*); the Construction Struggle (*Jahad Sazandegi*); the Literacy Campaign (*Nehzat Savadamuzi*); Medical Aid (*Emdad Pezeshki*); and they were active in relief operations in the war zones[116].

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[110] Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[111] Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 222.

[112] Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 170.

[113] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 305.

[114] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 31.

[115] Ibid., 32.

[116] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 306.

A survey conducted by an Iranian women's magazine about women's support for the war concluded that, "women have played an important role in the war through their activities, attitude and encouragement at home, workplace and behind the front lines. Women have encouraged their husbands and sons to go to war. They have sent money and clothes for the soldiers and war refugees. They raised the awareness of school children about war. They nursed the wounded and played their role in relief operations behind the front line"[117].

Furthermore, Ayatollah Khomeini supported a military mobilization of women in the latter years of the war. During these years the war was expanded to civilian zones and civilian regions of Iran became the target of air attacks. Hence, the Iranian army was pushed back and overthrown by Iraqi forces, as a result of lacked arms and knowledge. Consequently, the war became more and more unpopular, first among urban and later among rural citizens. The number of volunteers decreased, and war refugees protested. Under these circumstances women were needed in the military. Khomeini asked women to be prepared to take up arms in defense of Islam in a speech delivered in April 1985. He argued that, "what is not accepted in the *sharia,* is women's participation in primary *jahad* [118]. But when it comes to the question of defense there is consensus in Islam that women are obligated to take part in every possible way including military defense. Women should receive military training"[119].

It can be concluded that women, similar to the Iranian Revolution, contributed to a large extent to the Iran-Iraq War, both in the private and in the public sphere. This participation was moreover supported and encouraged by the Islamic state.

5.3. Economic conditions and changes: crisis

After the Iran-Iraq War, new policies were enforced to reconstruct the infrastructure that had been destroyed during the war, and to recover the economy. As a consequence of the emigrated men during the war, new 'reconstruction policies' stated that women continued to be necessary in the workplace. [120] The economic crisis and inflation led to a decline in the real income of households, the majority of which relied on a single income of the men. As a result, the financial contribution of women had proved to be necessary. Furthermore, "despite earlier restrictions and harsh discriminatory policies that discouraged women's work outside the home, the post-war reconstruction policies and the introduction of economic liberalization induced more women to join the labor market"[121].

In case of death of husband or father, according to *sharia* custody rights and children's financial rights are granted to a male relative. Consequently, a significant number of war widows requested the right to keep and raise the children and to be authorized to their husband's salary paid by the government budget[122]. It is therefore argued that the Iran-Iraq War and Iran's economic crisis in the aftermath have contributed to women's financial independence.

Accordingly, "since the early 1990s, the work environment has become more friendly to women"[123]. In the first years after the revolution, facilities as daycare in some government institutions were closed, but during the early 1990s many workplaces had re-established these kinds of facilities for their employees. Besides, a law

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[117] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 305.

[118] The literal meaning of *jahad* is contest. This refers to the highest ranking within the army.

[119] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 307.

[120] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 130.

[121] Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 221.

[122] Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran," *Feminist Review,* no. 69 (2001): 47.

[123] Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 174.

was passed in 1990 that allowed women to retire after a minimum of twenty years instead of twenty-five years in government service. While this law shows a similar method of earlier attempts to keep women at home, it was a response to female workers' demands in the public sector and recognized women's double duty in the workforce and at home. Moreover, this requested law explicitly declares that it is only applicable when voluntarily requested by women and they themselves fought to have this law passed by the parliament[124].

Hence, for many educated, working Iranian women, participation in the labor force has become a fundamental part of their identity. "These women who establish social relationships through their activity outside of the home, perceive work as a means to gaining autonomy and respect"[125]. Nahid, 32, who works for the municipality of Isfahan, argues similar to many of here female colleagues, "I have been working since the age of 18 and I am used to work. I cannot stand staying at home. I think that housework is burdensome whereas activity outside of the home makes me feel that I am part of society… I absolutely need my financial independence. I am also persuaded that my financial independence and my participation in breadwinning have earned me autonomy and decision-making authority. Besides, both my husband and my extended family respect me"[126].

In the Islamic Republic today, females have professions traditionally limited to men and considered as 'male employment' which include for instance firemen, policemen, taxi drivers, referees, and university professors[127]. The increasing involvement of women in public life has changed the dominant ideological discourse on women. "Authorities now acknowledge women's social role and are more attentive to women's specific problems"[128].

5.4. Islamic female leaders in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The change of women's role in the workforce is also reflected by the position of female leaders. Islamic female leaders more specific, have attempted to find a role for themselves in the higher levels of the Islamic society. These women have organized themselves into a number of similar fields of interest and activity. One field of activity and influence for female leaders was the religious one. In the Islamic Republic, it was considered important to train female religious leaders, and a variety of possibilities were given to women to be educated in this field. This led to increasing female enrollment in theological schools and a growing number of women became preachers and *mojtahedin*. Especially in this field, women were most encouraged to become active. However, the status women could achieve as a religious scholar was limited. *Sharia* did for instance not allow a *mojtahed* woman to cope with religious legal orders[129].

Another field in which Islamic female leaders have been active is social welfare. Islamic women were active in philanthropic organizations and welfare institutions constructed by the state to look after its *mostasafin*[130] supporters. In fact, a variety of women managed many of the state-funded welfare organizations, charities and foundations that carried out a mixture of welfare, such as educational and health charity[131]. In conclusion, opportunities for female leaders increased over the years after the Iran-Iraq War.

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[124] Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam, "Women and Labor in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 174.

[125] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 139.

[126] Ibid., 139.

[127] Carolien Roelants, *Iran Achter de Schermen: Mullahs en Meisjes,* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008), 79.

[128] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 131.

[129] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 308.

[130] The oppressed classes.

[131] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 308.

5.5. Urbanization, population growth and increasing age of marriage

A strong increase of urbanization led to an increase of women's employment. After the Iranian Revolution, urban regions grew rapidly. As indicated by Figure 6, the number of cities increased from 373 in 1976 to 614 in 1996, and 47 of these cities had more than 100.000 inhabitants, compared to 23 cities before the revolution. As a result of this increase, the majority of the population (61 percent in 2002) lived in urban regions. Besides, to moderate rural migration, rural regions were modernized by the government. The majority of the villages then became to have infrastructure, drinking water, electricity, and schools[132].

Figure 6. Evolution of Cities in Iran

Source: Kian-Thiébaut, 2002

As illustrated by Figure 7, partly as a result of bad economic conditions, the average age of marriage for women has increased from 19.75 before the revolution to 22 in 2004[133]. This has been another important factor for women to be active in the labor force, given that they are not yet responsible for a household. Moreover, next to economic circumstances delayed marriage also seems to be influenced by changing aspirations of educated women.

Figure 7. Average Age of Marriage for Iranian Women
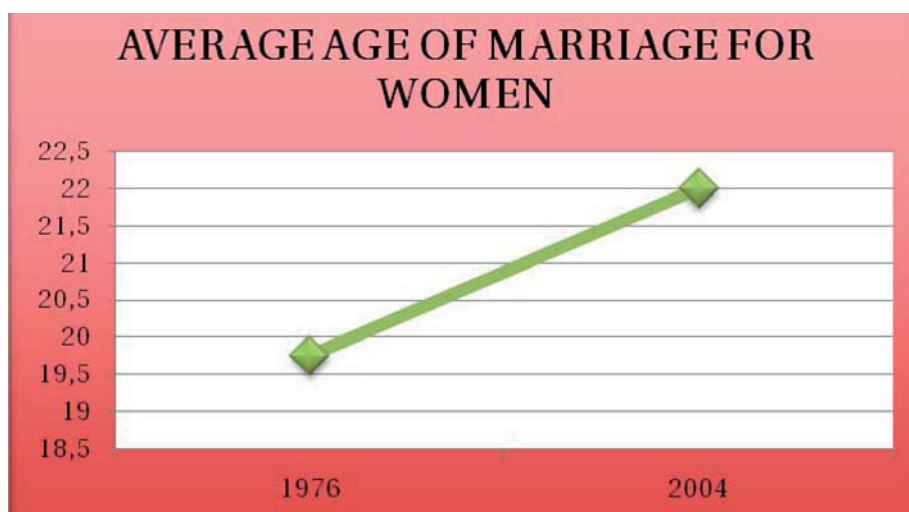
Source: World Development Indicators Database 2009

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[132] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 139.

[133] World Development Indicators Database 2009.

"Young educated women are less than half as likely as other women to be married by 22"[134]. Overall, the number of single Iranian women has increased which means that the number of married women has decreased. As indicated by Figure 8, the proportion of married women aged 15 and over decreased from 60.8 percent in 1966 to 52 percent in 2002[135].

Figure 8. Married Women as a Percentage of all Women Age 15 and Above
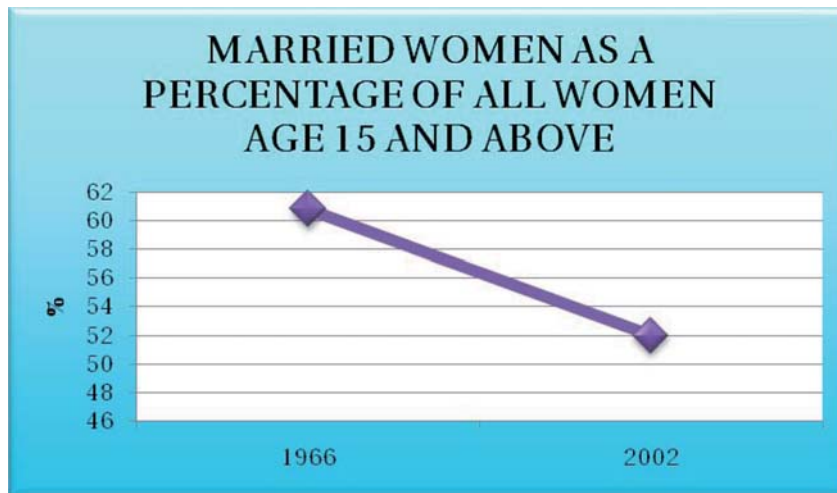
Source: Bahramitash and Kazemipour, 2006

As a result of an increasing age of marriage for women and a decline of the number of married women in general, the fertility rate has decreased. Iran's population grew by 70% to 60 million during the 1980s with half its population being under 20.[136] From that time forward, Iran has undergone the world's most rapid slowdown in population growth. Figure 9 illustrates a decrease in the total fertility rate (births per women) of 6.8 in 1982 to 4.0 in 1992, and 2.0 in 2002. As explained by the World Bank, compared to 96 middle-income countries in the world, Iran changed during the period from one of the fastest-growing populations to one of the slowest-growing ones including a high percentage of young people[137].

Figure 9. Total Fertility Rate
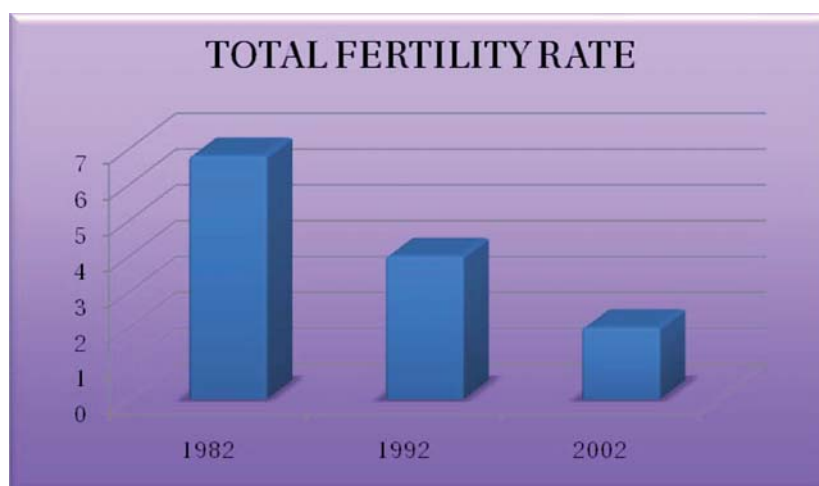
Source: Künkler, 2004

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[134]   Charles Kurzman, "A Feminist Generation in Iran?" *Iranian Studies,* vol. 41 (2008): 317.

[135]   Roksana Bahramitash and Shahla Kazemipour, "Myths and Realities of the Impact of Islam on Women: Changing Marital Status in Iran," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 15, issue 2 (2006): 122.

[136]   Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs,* vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 377.

[137]   World Development Indicators Database 2009.

It can be concluded that the percentage of women in the workforce has increased since the revolution despite *sharia* laws that prioritized women in the private sphere. Moreover, compared to the years of the Shah's regime, this participation increased significantly faster. This can be understood as a consequence of a variety of historic, social, and economic factors, i.e. the Iran-Iraq War and its difficult economic aftermath; increasing urbanization; decreasing population growth; increasing age of marriage and a low fertility rate among others, led to an overall increase of women' s participation in the workforce and consequently lead to women's empowerment. In the following chapter the results of these factors on women's participation in politics will be examined.

6. Women and Political Participation

In this chapter women and their political participation between 1979 and 2004 will be assessed. More specific, the differences between the years before and after the revolution will be analyzed. Moreover, women's participation in women's organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and the *majlis* will be emphasized.

6.1. Women and political participation between 1979 and 2004

In 1978, two women held cabinet posts, two women were senators, nineteen women were *majlis* deputies, three women were deputy ministers, and one woman hold the position of ambassador[138]. Immediately after the revolution however, women learned that neither the revolutionary council included a single woman, nor did the government of the Islamic Republic's first prime minister –Mahdi Bazargan– have any female minister or deputy minister[139]. Nevertheless, women continued their active participation in politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially in the *majlis*, the Bureau of Women´s Affairs, the Women´s Cultural and Social Council and urban and rural councils and municipalities.[140] Women were encouraged to vote, and Ayatollah Khomeini delivered speeches in which he appealed to women around the country to decide on representation. Also women's magazines in Iran published articles and editorials which described women's vote as a "national, political and Islamic duty"[141].

During the first decade after the revolution, women were, apart from voting, not significantly involved in politics. This changed however, as a result of the economic and social factors mentioned in the previous chapter. Consequently, women's growing active participation in politics, i.e. during the presidential election in 1990; the local elections, and the parliamentary election in 2000; and the presidential election in 2001, have been important in changing gender roles[142]. Moreover, in January 1996, the Ministry of Justice nominated 200 female judicial counselors to assure more favorable women's rights in court. This can be considered as a first step toward reestablishing female judges in the judiciary[143].

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[138] Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13, no 1/4 (2008): 168.

[139] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 154.

[140] Golnar Mehran, "Doing and Undoing Gender": Female Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *International Review of Education*, vol. 55, no 5 (2009): 547.

[141] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 305.

[142] Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran," *Feminist Review*, no 69 (2001): 49.

[143] Azadeh Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, no.1 (1997): 95.

Over the years, women continued to participate as voters and became candidates during local council elections in the early 1999s for instance. Women activists in the media and politics supported women's participation and officially requested local authorities to select potential female candidates, to encourage women to stand, and to assist the progress of their campaigns. In 1999 as a result, 1.120 women were elected as local council members. In fact, even in rural areas and small villages women were selected. This means that a relatively large number of women were participating in decision-making at both city and local levels[144]. Meanwhile, women were also participating in the Islamic Republic's delegation to international conferences and events[145].

Overall, between 1999 and 2001 the number of women who occupied high positions within formal politics increased, i.e. three women worked as advisors to the president; sixteen women were advisors to various ministries and 105 women were holding director positions.[146] "Women's participation in politics subverts traditionalists notions of the proper sphere of gender relations, and 'threatens society's moral fabric'"[147].

6.1.1. Women organizations and NGOs

Other fields of female activity have been women organizations and NGOs. Approximately 60 women organizations joined in the "National Muslim Women's League" to lobby for women's rights in political institutions[148]. In 1999, Fatemeh Hashemi (daughter of President Rafsanjani), Zahra Mostafi (daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini), Fatemeh Karrubi (member of the fourth *majlis* and wife of the former speaker of the parliament), and Azam Taleghani (daughter of Ayatollah Taleghani) each headed a different women's organization[149]. Moreover, "over the years the number of government-sponsored organizations dealing with women's affairs steadily increased."[150] These organizations included the socio-cultural council for women; the international office for women in the ministry of foreign affairs; and offices for women's affairs in other key ministries such as education, health, labor, justice, interior, and Islamic guidance.

As indicated by Figure 10, the number of women NGOs has increased from 13 in 1976 to 250 in 2003. [151] In various ways they were engaged in activities related to income generating and poverty relief, among others. Moreover, they were connected to women's media. The types of NGOs that are classified by the Center for Women's Participation as women's NGOs in Iran include the following: Charity Organizations, Minority Organizations, Health Organizations, Communication and Publication Organizations, Technical and Research Organizations, Social and Cultural Organizations, and Environmental Organizations.[152]

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[144] Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran," *Feminist Review,* no 69 (2001): 50.

[145] Parvin Paider, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 310.

[146] Majid Mohammadi, "Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, no. 1 (2007): 16.

[147] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Islam, Women and Civil Rights: The Religious Debate in the Iran of the 1990s," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 171.

[148] Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 384.

[149] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 159.

[150] Ibid., 159.

[151] Sussan Tahmasebi, "Women's NGOs as Agents of Change in Iran," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 127.

[152] Ibid., 128.

Figure 10. Evolution of Women NGOs

NUMBER OF WOMEN NGOS
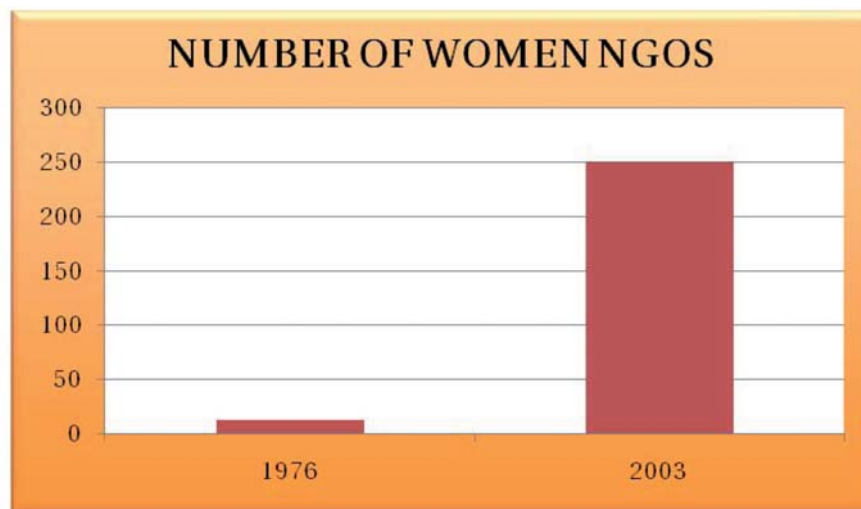
Source: Tahmasebi, 2003

6.1.2. Women in the *majlis*

Islamic female leaders with strict Islamic backgrounds, have next to religious and social fields, also been active in formal politics, although their participation in political decision-making has been more limited. In addition to local councils, women's principal involvement in the process of decision-making has been in the majlis. The *majlis* became an important institution for women as an attempt to change and reform the laws more favorable to women.

Four women were elected to the first *majlis* (1980-1984) of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Azam Taleghani, Iranian politician, journalist and head of the Society of Islamic Revolution Women of Iran; Mariam Behrouzi, leader of the Zainab Society[153] and Atequeh Rajai and Gowhar Sharieh Dastghaib, Iranian politicians. In the second majlis (1984-1988) three of the four women were reelected, while Marzieh Dabbagh, Islamist activist, replaced Azam Taleghani.

Due to their representation and influence within the government, women could focus on women's rights, education, work, and the *hejab*. In other words, "women in the *majlis* became spokespersons for average Iranian women"[154] For instance, the third *majlis* (1988-1992) passed bills that introduced a new version of earlier changes that were made to the Family Protection Law which included the establishment of special civil courts that concerned family conflicts.

Although women could not be judges yet, they could work as special advisors in courts. In 1998 for instance, the government elected four women as investigative civil officers. They did not have significant decision-making authority, but they did serve as advisors to clerics in charge of family rulings. Female lawyers moreover, represented both women and men complainants in civil and family courts. Right before the fourth *majlis* elections in 1992, the third *majlis* organized a parliamentary committee on women, youth, and family affairs. It also accomplished a law which financially supported divorced women.[155]

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[153] The Zainab Society one of the political groups of Iranian women whose objective is to strengthen the ideological foundation of women, expand the genuine Islamic culture and eliminate gender segregation.

[154] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 157.

[155] Ibid., 158.

As indicated by Table 5 and Figure 11, the number of women elected to the *majlis* increased. Nine women were elected to the fourth *majlis* (1992-1996), fourteen to the fifth (1996-2000),[156] and thirteen to the sixth (2000-2004)[157]. Fatemeh Hashemi was one of the fourteen women elected to the fifth *majlis* who was argued to have brought commotion and allure to the 1996 elections. She broke the unwritten dress code for female politicians by wearing jeans and a patterned scarf that exposed her chin. Moreover, she promoted female sports and supported women's rights, identifying herself as a modernist in the long-running struggle in between tradition and modernity. In the polls, she won the second highest vote in Tehran[158].

In conclusion, if commonly held views on the negative impact of Islam on women in the public sphere were absolute, a steady or sharp decline in political participation of women in post-revolutionary Iran would be evident. However, the numbers illustrate that women's political participation has increased after the revolution, although they are still underrepresented in political entities. The increase of women's participation in the *majlis* is significant given the ability to change laws. Moreover, women have the right to vote, and they actively utilize this power. In the following chapter it will be explained how Iranian women developed feminist consciousness and how this has led to a women's movement.

Table 5. Number of Women in the majlis

majlis	Year	Number of Women in the majlis
First	1980-1984	4
Second	1984-1988	3
Third	1988-1992	4
Fourth	1992-1996	9
Fifth	1996-2000	14
Sixth	2000-2004	13

Source: Esfandiari, 2004

Figure 11. Number of Women in the majlis

Source: Esfandiari, 2004

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[156] This number was higher than all women in both Houses of the United States Congress combined.

[157] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 159.

[158] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Rise and Fall of Fa'ezah Hashemi: Women in Iranian Elections," *Middle East Report*, no. 218 (2001): 8.

7. Iranian Feminism on the Road

Next to political participation and activism in the working sphere, women also became involved in the women's movement. In this chapter the concept of Iranian Islamic feminism will be explained, as well as the factors that led to this aspect of public participation.

7.1. Iranian feminism

Already in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, but with more intensity in 1989, after the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, educated women started to question the fact that their proper role was limited to the private sphere. "Women's social struggle against gender segregation has led to a radical change in their self-perception. They no longer allow themselves to be considered only as mothers and wives."[159] These women became more and more conscious of the fact that in order to improve their legal rights they should unite. From then on, the process of Iranian feminism started to expand, i.e. women from all over Iran demonstrated against Islamization of laws and institutions and joined the women's movement. This indicated the start of the Islamic Feminist Movement, despite the anti-feminist ideology of the government. "The material effects of the process of Islamization and of the Iran-Iraq War on the lived realities of women and men within the family and other social institutions is the key to the rise of feminist consciousness in Iran."[160]

It has to be explained however, that Islamic feminism cannot be compared to Western feminism. Whereas Western feminists generally share the opinion that separation is necessarily unequal, the Islamic feminist movement derives from a belief that stresses the distinction between men and women.[161] Islamic feminists base their rights on a more "female friendly" interpretation of Islam and *sharia* to promote women's status, but do not seek equality like Western feminists, nor equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities.

Moreover, Islamic feminists often believe that Western modernity has led to exploitation, alienation, and the depersonalization of women in Western societies. Within Islamic ideology, it is argued that, unlike capitalist systems in which women are exploited as cheap labor, Islamic societies do not take advantage of women. [162] In other words, Iranian women strive for rights within an Islamic framework.

It is therefore argued that Iranian feminism and Islam are not necessarily incompatible. "Feminist readings of the *sharia* is not only possible today but even inevitable when Islam is no longer an oppositional discourse in national politics but the official ideology"[163]. This could suggest that Iran's theocracy has paradoxically opened the way to improve women's rights.

Iranian feminists believe that men and women are equal according to the *Quran*. They furthermore believe that men and women are different in a physical, emotional, and psychological sense, but these differences do not limit them to the private sphere. Although many women accept the rules of the *hejab*, they protest against the punitive measures for violating these rules. Iranian feminists believe that they have the religious duty to "fight corruption and oppose injustice" to show that gender segregation in post-revolutionary society is not longer appropriate.

Despite the efforts of religious leaders discourage this new female awakening, many feminist journalists, lawyers, professors, university students, and members of the parliament have publically been expressing

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[159] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 127.

[160] Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran," *Feminist Review,* no. 69 (2001): 47.

[161] Patricia J. Higgins, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 10, no. 3 (1985): 493.

[162] Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *Review of Education,* vol. 51 (2005): 332.

[163] Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs,* vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 378.

their criticism. For instance, as explained in chapter six, female members of the parliament started to promote laws to end discrimination against women. [164] Especially younger women in Iran are considered to be more feminist than their mother's generation, i.e. they are more committed to economic independence and marital equality, and they are more active in politics. This applies to a significant part of the Iranian population today, given that more than a quarter is younger than fifteen years old.

As a result, women have been one of the most important groups in the Iranian Civil Rights Movement between 1996 and 2000, which goal was to liberate society. "Iranian feminists, religious or non-religious, are the noticeable part of these groups of women who formed a substantial portion within this movement along with male university students, journalists, intellectuals, and political activists"[165].

There are some important factors and developments that have contributed to the growing existence of feminist consciousness and the transformation of women's attitude over the years after the revolution. They will be explained in the following paragraphs.

7.2. Family and education

Women's increasing access to education has already been explained in chapter four. It is worth mentioning again however, that education has been a key factor in the development of feminist consciousness. "Around the world, it is widely recognized that feminist attitudes are associated with women's education, that women's education increases their economic prospect, that increased economic prospects lead women to delay marriage and bear fewer children, and that this effect is largest in societies that are most patriarchal." [166]

As previously explained, the Islamic regime Islamized the Iranian educational system after the revolution. Consequently, the regime encouraged study of Islam in schools and universities. This contributed to increasing education for female students. In other words, young women, who previously might have been denied access to education by conservative families, now did have access to Islamic education.[167]

Other important factors in the development of Iranian feminism are family circumstances. In other words, parents either encourage their daughters to enjoy education or not. The same difference in between Iranian families is seen in support or discouragement to participate in the public sphere. This is illustrated by Faezeh, one of the Iranian girls interviewed by Dutch journalist Carolien Roelants. Faezeh acknowledges that parents have a great influence on the future of Iranian girls, "my friend (girl) has a boyfriend, and one day she took him to her parents house in the north of Iran. Her parents stayed in one part of the house, and she and her boyfriend shared a bedroom in another part of the house. Every Iranian girl has to fight for her freedom. Those who stay at home remain prisoners of family and society." Faezeh explains that "it depends on one's willingness to conquer one's freedom or not. Many girls nowadays fight for their freedom which has positive results."[168]

7.3. The women's press: *Zanan*

In the early 1990s women were granted the right to publish their own magazines that reflected their particular ideas[169]. The expansion of female journalists and the development of reformist newspapers and journals have greatly contributed to women's consciousness and feminist ideas, made new discourses on women

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[164] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 33.

[165] Majid Mohammadi, "Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, no. 1 (2007): 1.

[166] Charles Kurzman, "A Feminist Generation in Iran?" *Iranian Studies*, vol. 41 (2008): 198.

[167] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Beyond Beijing: Obstacles and Prospects for the Middle East," in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 6.

[168] Carolien Roelants, *Iran Achter de Schermen: Mullahs en Meisjes*, (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008), 89.

[169] Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 130.

possible and played a key role in the resistance to new restrictions on women. Especially after the election of President Khatami in 1997 women's magazines became more outspoken on issues related to women's rights, needs, and problems.[170] Figure 12 illustrates the increase of female journalists and publishers in the years between 1976 and 1996. The number of female journalists has significantly increased between 1976 and 1996, from 50 to 400, respectively. The same growth can be seen among female publishers, which has grown between 1976 and 1996 from 0 to 398 respectively[171].

Some of the women's press was fundamentally published according to the ideology of the Islamic regime, such as *Neda* (*The Voice)* or like *Payame-Hajar* (*Hajar's Message*). Nevertheless, the journal *Zane-Ruz* (*Women Today)*, established in 1964, became a forum for disapproval with the post-revolutionary laws. Since then, various other magazines were established related to different points of view about the role of women in Iran in specific, and Muslim society in general. Among them are Jens-e Dovvom (*The Second Sex*) and *Farzaneh* (*The Wise/Cultured*).[172]

Figure 12. Female Journalists and Publishers
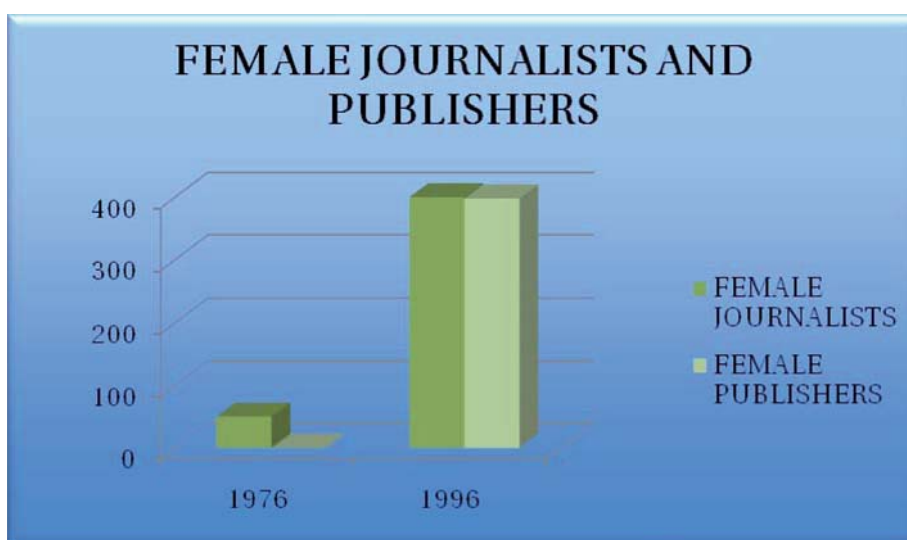
Source: Elaheh Rostami Povey, 2001

Amidst the magazines that have been publishing feminist ideas, the most widely read is the monthly, progressive, and feminist magazine *Zanan* (*Women*), that has been serving as a tool for women to express and share opinions as well as different point of views. It was established in 1992 and has been the first independent magazine after the revolution that particularly deals with women's issues.[173] In 2004, approximately 120.000 readers, mostly urban-educated women, subscripted to the monthly magazine.[174] Compared to other women's journals in Iran, *Zanan* is independent, i.e. it is not restricted to state perspectives, and the female editors are not related to important public figures.

Both men and women with both Islamic and secular backgrounds publish articles in *Zanan*. Its most prominent contributors include the female sociology professor Shahleh Shaditalab; the female film director Tahmineh Milani; the male reformist cleric Hojatoleslam Saidzadeh; and the female lawyers Mehrangiz

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[170]   Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 159.

[171]   Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran," *Feminist Review,* no. 69 (2001): 47.

[172]   Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 379.

[173]   Roza Eftekhari, "Zanan: Trials and Successes of a Feminist Magazine in Iran," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 15.

[174]   Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 379.

Kar and Shirin Ebadi. The latter had been a judge under the Shah's regime and forced to leave the Islamic Republic, following the applications of *sharia*. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003.

Zanan publishes articles on a regular base arguing in favor of extending women's rights and removal of daily-faced obstacles. Moreover, most articles emphasize different interpretations of *sharia* which has made *Zanan* a space for political debate inside and outside Iran. The magazine is run and edited entirely by women.[175]

Generally, the content of *Zanan* consists of three types of discussions, i.e. religious discussions; feminist discussions; and social discussions. *Zanan* believes that women's individual and social lives are deeply influenced by religion. Therefore it would not be possible to deal with the Iranian women's issue without knowledge of Islam. More specific, any changes in women's situation are only possible by means of rereading and reinterpretation of religious beliefs and doctrines.[176] *Zanan* is mostly characterized by its emphasis on reinterpretations of Islam. Articles for example, argue and highlight the egalitarian spirit of many verses in the *Quran*.

In an article written by Hojatoleslam Saidzadeh and published in 1992 for instance, the author criticizes the decision made by revolutionary authorities to exclude women from the function of judge, by arguing that on the basis of Islamic traditions women and men had equal potential, regardless of employment or function, and that there was no Islamic justification for the discriminatory state policy. Another subject discussed in *Zanan* in 1992 was the ability of women to become fully acknowledged as *mojtaheds* and to make religious judgments binding. As mentioned before, clerics had attempted to limit judgments of female *mojtaheds* to the private sphere[177].

In addition to critical religious discussions, *Zanan* also attempts to provide its readers with feminist discussions. In general, the Iranian perception on feminism has always been associated with Western feminism or 'Westoxication'; social tolerance; and violence by men against women. As a result, the general Iranian concept of feminism and feminists has been negative and few wished to be labeled as such. Zanan thus started to introduce the history of feminism, its various divisions, and its important leaders. [178] In other words, *Zanan* has been providing its readers with a perception of feminism within an Islamic framework.

Finally, besides religious and feminist discussions, the social reality of Iranian women is discussed. *Zanan* has been publishing reports on family courts; the serial murder of women; female prisoners; and many other concerns. Moreover, the journal publishes articles on male/female relations among the youth, student marriages and successful women. "The intent has been to suggest that despite social, cultural, and political obstacles, women have been able to advance"[179]. Furthermore, during recent years, Iranian female journalists have begun several online news bulletins as well as the internet-based Iranian Women's News Agency (IWNA) in the end of 2004. [180] This serves, similar to *Zanan*, as a forum to share and express opinions about women's issues in Iran.

7.4. Globalization

Another factor that has led to the development of Iranian feminism has been the trend of globalization. More specific, globalization has led to international awareness of human rights and played a role in the increasing consciousness of women in Iran. Because of global communication, Iranian women are now more aware of

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[175] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 159.

[176] Roza Eftekhari, "Zanan: Trials and Successes of a Feminist Magazine in Iran," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move*, ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 17.

[177] Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 380.

[178] Roza Eftekhari, "Zanan: Trials and Successes of a Feminist Magazine in Iran," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move*, ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 20.

[179] Ibid., 20.

[180] Eva Patricia Rakel, "The Political Elite, Women, and Journalism in Iran: is Democratization Possible?" *Comparative Sociology*, vol. 7 (2008): 488.

emancipated women in the West. "This increase in space-time distanciation opens up many possibilities of social change by breaking free from the restraints of local customs and practices."[181] Iranian women today are exposed to, strengthened and shaped by social influences on distance. Important is the development of communities of interests, taste and believes as a result of globalization, feminists being one of them. Although Iranian feminism is distinct from Western feminism, "there are ample signs that many literate and educated women in Iran today are becoming part of the global feminist community"[182].

After the revolution and with special intensity during the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian government strongly encouraged its population to reproduce as much as possible. As mentioned in chapter four, this has led to a remarkable young population that Iran faces today, consisting of seventy percent younger than thirty years. Especially young girls are influenced by satellite TV and Internet as a consequence of globalization. In other words, an increasing part of the population is affected and influenced by the West, which enables people in Iran to participate in dialogues on human rights and democratic issues.

Moreover, on a broader scale, the Islamic state is unable to effectively control political expression in student demonstrations; the radicalization of slogans used in these protests; distribution of political statements and graffiti in public places; websites of women's organizations; chat rooms; and satellite feeds from abroad, among others[183].

7.5. Results of the women's movement

The growing feminist movement has led to several improvements concerning women's position in the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as decrease of female discrimination. Nahid Musavi, an Iranian journalist, argues for instance, "Islamist women are no longer confined to the private sphere of the home. They are enrolled in universities, actively participate in social, economic and political life and try to promote their status. The scope of change in their self-perception and status becomes clear when compared to traditionalist-religious norms and values according to which women are not allowed to leave the home without their father's or husband's authorization. Likewise, they are not supposed to talk with men who do not belong to their family. The presence of several Islamist women in the *majlis*, some of whom are outspoken, shows that despite the regression these women have had important achievements"[184].

Especially the results of women's participating in the Civil Rights Movement have led to the improvement of conditions which explains that Islam can also be a liberating force to women.[185] However, new interpretations of *sharia* are difficult to realize and it remains an obstacle for Iranian women to improve their legal rights. Women's efforts have challenged the patriarchal system and gender inequality which has resulted in the weakening of patriarchal order and male domination both in public and in private spheres.[186] In fact, in a study about divorce in Iran, Ziba Mir-Hosseini demonstrates how women manipulate the law and the court in order to reduce the negative effects of the *sharia* related to divorce[187]. Although modification in the status of women is mostly limited to type and scope of opportunities, legislation affecting women has also begun to change[188]. Female members of the *majlis* have succeeded in winning the support of some "reformist-

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[181] Asghar, Fathi, "Communities in Place and Communities in Space: Globalization and Feminism in Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 219.

[182] Ibid., 220.

[183] Ramesh Sepehrad, The Role of Women in Iran's New Popular Revolution," *Brown Journal of World Affairs,* vol. 9, issue 2 (2003): 224.

[184] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 138.

[185] Haleh, Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: an Iranian Case-Study,* 1st. ed. (London: Macmillian Press LTD, 1998), 16.

[186] Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut, "From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The weakening of patriarchal order," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 38, issue 1 (2005): 46.

[187] Ali Akbar Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century Long Struggle," *The Muslim World,* vol. 94 (2004): 443.

[188] Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies,* vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008), 168.

minded male colleagues and clerics" in their request to improve the legal status of women. Their attempts have shown results for some specialists of Islamic law and jurisprudence, who can change existing laws through new interpretations including *Ayatollahs* Yusif Sani'I and Bujnurdi, Hujjat al-Islams Muhsin Sa'id-Zadeh and Muhaqiq-Damad; and Husayn Mihrpur and Ahmad Auchakian who now contribute to debates about women's issues through their writings and interviews with women's magazines. They often support women's proposals to "adapt Islamic laws to the realities of Iranian society in which women are active in social, cultural, economic, religious, and political fields"[189].

Their efforts have resulted in the rectification of some laws that disadvantaged women in marriage. "With some male support, they passed a proposal to improve divorce and custody laws". [190] Moreover, male judges have become more favorable to women's rights and since 1998 women may be judges again. [191] Furthermore, in 1996 the fifth *majli*s approved a proposal presented by female deputies to create the Special Commission of Women's and Family's Affairs composed of thirteen members, among nine members who are women. This commission intents to reform laws to improve the protection of women's rights.[192] "Iran has marched into the new century (21st) with women as a powerful catalyst of political change"[193].

7.5.1. Individualization

It is argued that, as a result of the women's movement and increasing participation in the public sphere, new demographic, social and economic pattern of behavior has led to a certain degree of autonomization and individualization.[194] More specific, deriving from globalizing forces of modernity, a greater individualism characterizes current women's activism. The state's efforts to impose a common identity on Iranian women has been having opposite effects and intensified the aspiration to find a balance between the extremes of Western individualism and Islamic collectivism. An increasing number of women is trying to separate their identity from group ties such as religion, family and ethnicity, to individual interpretations based on their own achievements.[195] In other words, women are more aware of their individual rights and individual autonomy within marriage, which weakens the patriarchal structure of Iranian society.

It can be concluded that, despite patriarchal ideology, a feminist generation has been established in Iran. Moreover, as demonstrated in previous paragraphs, Iran's patriarchal society is not infinite, based on the fact that women do have a presence in public life, especially compared to other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia. It is remarkable, that feminist consciousness has been developed under a regime that is openly hostile to feminist ideology. This shows that other factors, such as education, family, female press, and globalization can be more powerful influences in the process of shaping and changing women's than the conservative interpretation of Muslim ideology. In the following chapter the moderate interpretation of Muslim ideology will be assessed by explaining women's public participation under the regime of President Khatami.

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[189] Guity Nashat, "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1/4 (2008), 135.

[190] Guity Nashat, "Introduction," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 33.

[191] Mirjam Künkler, "In the Language of the Islamic Sacred Texts: the Tripartite Struggle for Advocating Women's Rights in the Iran of the 1990s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 25, issue 2 (2004): 384.

[192] Azadeh Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, no.1 (1997): 95.

[193] Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63.

[194] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran*, ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 127.

[195] Ali Akbar Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century long Struggle," *The Muslim World*, vol. 94 (2004): 443.

8. Women's Public Participation under Khatami's Presidency

In this chapter women's public participation under the regime of President Khatami will be assessed. Furthermore, Khatami's reform policies and the effects on the position of women will be evaluated. Moreover, an overview of Iran's contemporary society (2010) will be given and it will be explained how the government adapts to this.

8.1. Khatami to power: reform policies

The election of President Mohamad Khatami in 1997 shows that Islamic teachings do not necessarily oppose women's rights and equality. One step further it can be argued that Islamic feminism and Islam are not incompatible. To put it differently, it is merely the interpretation of Islam that can lead to less rights for women as has been the case in Iranian governments previous to Khatami's. Although Khatami's moderate political campaign promised more liberties and equal rights to women, he received 79 percent of the votes of the Iranian Islamic population. This suggests that a significant part of the population agreed with his moderate ideas relating women. During the presidential elections, a growing number of Iranian women supported Khatami and as a result, most women voted for him.

After being elected, "women enjoyed somewhat greater freedom in matters of dress, presence in public and intermixing of the sexes"[196]. Khatami allowed more political expression, which encouraged female activism, including lawyers and professors. Moreover, he authorized a relative freedom of press[197]. During the first two years of Khatami's administration, approximately 1000 women occupied executive positions. Furthermore, he organized an international women's sport competition and opened a wide debate on women's rights[198]. Moreover, the administration decided that the minimum wage for female state employees should be equal to that for male employees[199].

President Rafsanjani, Khatami's predecessor, was the first president in the Islamic Republic of Iran to select a female special advisor on women's affairs, Shahla Habibi. When Khatami came to office, he replaced her with Zahra Shojai. Unlike Habibi, Shojai joined cabinet meetings where she was joined by Masoumeh Ebtekar, the first female vice president in charge of the environment. In 1999, Zahra Shojai was appointed as president of Al-Zahra University, becoming the first woman ever to hold such a position[200]. For instance, Khatami's government was the first to hold municipality council elections, even though a law concerning these elections was already passed in 1980.

During his presidential years, Khatami consistently emphasized the importance of improving civil society institutions in order to create a more democratic Iran, in response to the citizens' need.[201] Moreover, he stressed the increase of knowledge, awareness and education for women as significant in improving women's rights

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[196] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 160.

[197] Azadeh Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, no.1 (1997): 81.

[198] Scott Macleod, "Our Veils, Ourselves," *Time South Pacific*, vol. 152, issue 4 (1998): 27.

[199] Majid Mohammadi, "Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, no. 1 (2007): 16.

[200] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 159.

[201] Sussan Tahmasebi, "Women's NGOs as Agents of Change in Iran," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move*, ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 121.

and recognition[202]. He argued starting his second term in office, that Iran has been much more developed in the field of women's rights than developing and third world countries. "At some points, we even reached the same level of developed countries," he stated[203]. In addition, the dual role given to Iranian women, as explained in chapter three, was illustrated by President Khatami. According to him, the principal role of women at home "as the manager and master of the house" should not marginalize them from the public sphere, while her appearance in public life should not lead to the degeneration of the family[204].

It can be concluded that even though Ayatollah Khamenei, successor of Khomeini, still had the highest authority, Khatami's government signified a reform era concerning Iranian women. This means that it is possible for women to be active in the public sphere and enjoy equal rights under an Islamic regime. Current President Ahmadinejad however, has been representing a more repressive government.

8.2. Current situation

Although women are the most repressed group of Iranian society, they are also the most dynamic segment, next to the youth[205]. This has been explained in the previous chapters as a result of growing public participation, education, and feminism.

Although current President Ahmadinejad imposes conservative policies towards women, at the same time the government realizes more and more that it "cannot easily keep women in their homes, control their appearance no matter how harsh the punishment, create a segregated environment for women, or eradicate Western influence in the younger generation" Consequently, it has become evident that religious leaders have been trying to adapt their conservative views to a modernizing Iran even though they have not yet formulated clear guidelines that both contain a conservative interpretation of Islamic law and satisfy the aspirations of modern Iranian women[206].

A clear example of an attempt to manage the modernizing country, is the *Sighe*, a temporary marriage, which has been encouraged by Pour Mohammadi, Interior Minister of Iran until 2008. This marriage was "reinvented" out of old Shi'i religious traditions to allow young men and women to "date legally". Couples are allowed to decide whether to be married for one hour until 99 years. As a result, this marriage gives more freedom to men, but also to women[207].

Pardis Mahdavi reflects the notion of modern Iranian women in her book *Iran's Sexual Revolution: Passionate Uprising*, in which she argues that a sexual and social revolution is taking place in contemporary Iranian society, which intents to have political consequences. More specific, Mahdavi explores the ways in which the sexual revolution has brought about changes in the social, economic, and political spheres of Iran. She mentions for instance, that the *Komite*[208] has changed between 2001 and 2007, from aggressive and conservative "watch-dogs" relating women to flirtatious policemen. "In the conservative world of the Islamic Republic of Iran, significant numbers of urban young people (including a large number of women) are

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[202] Golnar Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: a Paradox of Tradition and Modernity," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 284.

[203] Carolien Roelants, *Iran Achter de Schermen: Mullahs en Meisjes,* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2008), 79.

[204] Golnar Mehran, "The Female Educational Experience in Iran: a Paradox of Tradition and Modernity," in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move,* ed. Lee H. Hamilton (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003), 71.

[205] Ramesh Sepehrad, The Role of Women in Iran's New Popular Revolution," *Brown Journal of World Affairs,* vol. 9, issue 2 (2003): 221.

[206] Haleh Esfandiari, "The Role of Women Members of Parliament, 1963-88," in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic,* ed. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 160.

[207] "1 Hour, 99 Years - Temporary Marriage Iranian Style" documentary IKON, available on the internet at: http://www.ikonrtv.nl/ikondocumentaire/documentaire.asp?oId=2610

[208] Iranian morality police.

skeptical of, disaffected from, or openly hostile towards the values underpinning the Islamic Revolution"[209]. This means that contemporary Iran is a country in transition, for a significant part as a result of women's empowerment.

Especially young Iranian women who are born and raised in the Islamic Republic, increasingly oppose obligated veiling, by leaving a lock of hair out, or by putting on make-up. [210] In modern Iran the black *chador* is only worn by high-level female officials or street demonstrators who participate in religious activities. A more modern form of the *hejab* nevertheless, combines striped or colorful scarves and knee-high, light color, and tightly fit tunics over slim pants in public and private offices in Tehran. Moreover, short and tight jackets and sandals are worn, and more women wear make up in public. [211]

Summary and Conclusions

To conclude, this study has aimed to answer two questions. First of all, "in what ways does Islamic law construct and limit women's role, participation in the public sphere, and feminist consciousness in the Islamic Republic of Iran?" Secondly, "in what ways do historic, social, and economic factors and changes contribute to women's empowerment, i.e. their role, participation in the public sphere, and feminist consciousness in the Islamic Republic of Iran?"

For the first time in Iranian history, women participated in significant numbers to overthrow the Shah during the Iranian Revolution. They were involved in various activities, and collaborated with their male counterparts, regardless gender. This involvement in the revolution has been an essential experience for Iranian women that led to awareness of their capabilities. To put it differently, the revolution has provided women with a sense of power, self-confidence, greater respect and political influence. This has been the historic starting point of women's empowerment.

As a result of the revolution, Iran changed to the Islamic Republic of Iran, a theocratic state based on *sharia* laws. Reflected by the Iranian Constitution, these laws have generally limited Iranian women's legal rights. However, Islam, like any other religion, is subject to interpretation. This is demonstrated by the constitution which elaborates a few articles regarding the role of women in Iranian society, but leaves them open to interpretation. In other words, the Iranian government and religious leaders are responsible for the understanding of these articles. As a result of a conservative patriarchal perception by the Iranian government, women's role in the private sphere has been encouraged and their role in the public sphere has been marginalized. Hence, a number of measures have been taken in order to reflect this patriarchy and Islamize Iranian society, such as gender segregation, compulsory veiling in public places, restrictions for women in high level positions, and several constraints for women related to family issues.

However, over the years, policies implemented by the government of the Islamic Republic have unintended and paradoxically led to women´s empowerment as a result of a sharp increase in urbanization, increase of women's average age of marriage, a significant decline in the total fertility rate, a decrease in the gap between urban and rural areas, and women´s increasing access to education. They now consist of a high number of enrolled students within schools and universities, and the percentage of Iranian girls enrolled at primary school level far exceeds the average of the Middle East and North Africa. This high percentage of educated women is likely to use their knowledge in the future and influence political and economic developments that could transform gender roles and women´s status in Iran.

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[209] Pardis Mahdavi, *Iran's Sexual Revolution: Passionate Uprising,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 18.

[210] Azadeh Kian- Thiébaut, "From Islamization to the Individualization of Women in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran,* ed. Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (Surry: Curzon Press, 2002), 136.

[211] Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 213.

Although laws are important in order to improve the position of women, it can be concluded that the participation of Iranian women in the public sphere is not entirely determined by Islamic laws. Despite patriarchal government policies and partly as a result of increasing access to education, participation in the public sphere, i.e. political and labor force participation has increased since the revolution. Moreover, although the reformation has not yet been sufficiently radical to bring the majority of women out to the public sphere for equal participation in society, there have been significant changes in women's presence and participation as the result of a marginal impact of the institution of the Islamic government. It can therefore be concluded that Iran's patriarchal society is not infinite, since women do have a presence in public life, especially compared to other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia.

In other words, women's "rights and duties" have been significantly different from their behavior patterns. These behavior patterns have been determined by factors, other than laws, and should not be underestimated. To put it differently, if women's status had only been defined by Islamic law, this development would not have been possible. One concrete example is the Iran-Iraq war followed by an economic crisis. Out of necessity, the regime temporarily changed its perception on the position of women and women were encouraged to participate in the labor force. It can thus be concluded that Islamic law may have a limited effect on the role of women; in the end their position is more influenced by historic, social, demographic and economic factors.

As a consequence, women's public behavior has led to changing lifestyles and rising expectations and demands by women who are readapting modern values and behavior, restructuring their lives, questing for autonomy, aiming to equal rights and opportunities, and shaping new identities, within an Islamic framework. Iranian women who do not consider themselves merely as mothers and wives but also as individuals now question the conservative interpretations of Islamic laws and institutions that tend to implement patriarchal structures, both within the public and the private spheres.

This has been the starting point of Iranian feminism which has been influenced by education and family circumstances, globalization and female journals such as *Zanan*. This women's movement has contributed to several improvements, both related to real opportunities and to legislation. Besides, both the women's movement and increasing public participation have led to individualization, i.e. women's consciousness of their individual rights. This has resulted in the weakening of the Iranian patriarchal structure and growing demand for democracy. The awareness obtained through their involvement in the revolution and developed throughout the Islamic Republic has given women the ability to organize and mobilize. As a consequence, feminists are now considered a powerful group in Iran, able to change laws by means of different interpretations. This will be a future tool for Iranian women to change their legal rights.

It can be concluded moreover, that political interpretation of Islam and the dynamic nature of *sharia* have proved not to be incompatible with the realities of modern Iranian society. It has shaped feminist consciousness which opened the way for women to readapt modernity, and challenge institutionalized gender inequality. They have been concentrating on their participation in public life and demanded their own interpretation of Islamic laws to introduce legal reforms and change traditional cultural perceptions of women. Therefore, if commonly held stereotypes about the implementation of Islamic laws were absolute, the reverse trend of evidence provided in this study would be a fact.

Apart from some minor changes and amendments of laws improving women's rights, the Islamic Republic has not changed its system since the revolution, although there have been differences in between governments. The problem seems to be related to the interpretation of Islam and Islamic laws by different presidents and religious leaders. Whereas the revolutionary government seemed to rule a conservative and "female unfriendly" interpretation of these laws, other presidents such as Khatami seem to have interpreted the same laws in a more modern way which led to reform policies regarding women. It can therefore be concluded that it is possible to change the Islamic regime in favor of women, as the result of the interpretative nature of Islam.

As a consequence, it can generally be concluded that the role, participation in the public sphere, and feminist consciousness of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran are - to a great extent - determined by historic, social and economic factors and changes, rather than Islamic laws and religious ideologies. In other words, there is no insurmountable conflict between Iranian feminism and Islamic ideology. This is the paradox of the Islamic Republic of Iran, where, despite laws that aim to accomplish the opposite, Iranian women could contribute to the emergence of a democratic state within an Islamic framework.

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Resumen: El presente documento de trabajo estudia a la población femenina iraní y cuestiona la influencia absoluta de un régimen teocrático islámico sobre dicha población, comparando el papel de las mujeres en el Irán post-revolucionario con su situación durante el régimen del Shah. Más específicamente, el objetivo de esta investigación es mostrar que el papel de las mujeres, su participación en la esfera pública y la conciencia feminista en la República Islámica de Irán están más determinados por factores y cambios históricos, sociales y económicos que por la influencia de las leyes islámicas (*sharia*) e ideologías religiosas. Se intenta dar respuesta a dos preguntas: primero, ¿de qué manera la *sharia* construye y limita el papel, la participación en la esfera pública y la conciencia feminista de las mujeres en la República Islámica de Irán?; y, segundo, ¿de qué forma contribuyen los cambios históricos, sociales y económicos al fortalecimiento de la posición social de las mujeres en Irán?.

Abstract: The goal of this study is to examine the female population in Iran and to question the absolute influence of an Islamic theocratic regime by comparing women´s role in post-revolutionary Iran to their position under the Shah´s regime. More specific, this paper aims to show that the role, participation in the public sphere and feminist consciousness of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran are –to a great extent– determined by historic, social and economic factors and changes, as opposed to Islamic laws (*sharia*) and religious ideologies. It intents to answer two questions. First, "in what ways does *sharia* construct and limit the role, participation in the public sphere, and feminist consciousness of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran?" Second, "in what ways do historic, social and economic factors and changes contribute to women´s empowerment in Iran?".