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FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IV. IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

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After the Revolution of 1978-79, “feminism,” because of its associations with the West and its appropriation by the previous regime, soon became viewed by the ruling clerics as synonymous with decadence. Yet the Islamic Republic has seen a marked raising of the nation’s gender consciousness. Whatever concerns women, from their most private to their most public activities, from what they should wear and study to whether and where they should work, are issues that generate considerable heat and emotion and are openly debated and disputed by different factions. The result has been the breakdown of all kinds of easy oppositions, for example public versus private, or Islamic versus feminist, and the gendering of the whole political process. It would be a distortion to talk of an organized or coherent feminist movement in the Islamic Republic; but women certainly played important roles in forming its earlier gender discourses and then in changing and modifying them. Three distinct phases of feminist activities can be discerned, if we take a minimalist definition of feminism, that is, as a broad concern with women’s issues and an awareness that they suffer discrimination at work, in the home and in society because of their gender, as well as action aimed at improving their lives and changing the situation. These phases correspond with wider socio-economic

and political changes in the Islamic Republic.

First phase. The early revolutionary phase began with women's massive participation in demonstrations during the 1978 upheavals and ended with the ascendancy of the clerical forces by summer 1981. This phase partially coincided with the moderate government of Mahdī Bāzargān, when hundreds of women's groups mushroomed all over the country, in mosques, government offices, factories, schools, and so on. Ranging from small and spontaneous to large and organized, these groups represented the three main ideological tendencies, Islamic, Nationalist, and Marxist, which together brought about the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in February 1979. Some of them were affiliated to underground political organizations of the Pahlavi era, others were formed during the Revolution (Azari, 1993, pp. 204-17; Shahshahani, 1984, pp. 108-15; Tabari and Yeganeh, 1982, pp. 203-30).

These women's groups neither had mass support nor voiced any new feminist demands. Women active in them showed that they were aware of and opposed to the gender biases in the orthodox interpretations of Islamic law, which were becoming increasingly evident in the Revolutionary Council's decisions and the religious leaders' announcements, but in general they subordinated their feminist aspirations to the wider goals of the parent organization. Both leftist and nationalist forces then saw the issue of women's rights as secondary to anti-imperialist goals and national interests. With the onset of war with Iraq and the taking of American hostages, followed by the increasing repression of the left and the nationalist forces and the elimination of Islamic diversity, the women's issue lost its urgency (S. Afshar, 1983, pp. 157-60; Azari, 1983, p. 192; Jalālī Nāʾīnī, 1997, p. 28; Moghissi, 1993, pp. 161-66; Paidar, 1995, pp. 234-56; Yeganeh, 1982, pp. 59-68; Tohidi, 1991, pp. 251-3; Sanasarian, 1986, pp. 209-10; Shahidian, 1994; Shahshahani, 1984, pp. 115).

The most important women's groups of this phase were the Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution (Jāmeʿa-ye zanān-e enqelāb-e eslāmī), and the National Union of Women (Etteḥād-e mellī-e zanān), with Islamic and leftist ideologies respectively. The Women's Society started as a loose coalition of individual women activists with varying Islamic tendencies coming together during the 1978 upheavals. They took over the pre-revolutionary, state-sponsored Women's Organization of Iran (Sāzmān-e zanān-e Īrān); this organization, formed in the 1960s, led by Princess Ašraf Pahlavī, and allocated a special budget to provide health and educational services for women, expanded its activities in the 1970s with offices all over the country (Afkhami,

1984, pp. 334-37; Sanasarian, 1982, pp. 83-93). During the Revolution its offices and communication facilities were appropriated and then put at the disposal of Muslim women revolutionaries. The Provisional Government axed its budget, causing a rift between women activists and government, the break-up of the organization and the dispersal of its members. These women, whose activism and personal links with the Islamic forces carried political weight, continued their activities elsewhere. One of them, Aʿẓam Ṭālaqānī, the daughter of Ayatollah Maḥmūd Ṭālaqānī, was elected to the first Majles, established the Islamic Institute of Women of Iran (Moʾassasa-ye eslāmī-e zanān-e Īrān), and published the journal *Payām-e ḥājar*. Another, Monīr Gorjī, an activist and preacher, was promoted by the Islamic Republican Party (Ḥezb-e jomhūrī-e eslāmī) and became the only woman representative in the Assembly of Experts (Majles-e ḵobragān), which ratified the Constitution. A third, Zahrā Rahnavard, wife of Mīr Ḥosayn Mūsawī (who later became prime minister), took part in the Islamization of the press in the Eṭṭelāʿāt Publishing Institute, transforming its weekly women's magazine (*Eṭṭelāʿāt-e bānovān*) into the Islamic *Rāh-e Zaynab* (Azari, 1983, pp. 210-17; Tabari and Yeganeh, 1982, pp. 223-27).

The National Union of Women, the largest semi-autonomous organization, with a feminist-Marxist ideology, emerged in the aftermath of International Women's Day of 8 March 1979, when thousands of women demonstrated in Tehran (and Shiraz). Many women were disturbed by the dismantling of the pre-revolutionary legal reforms, in particular the declaration on 26 February that the 1967 Family Protection Law (which had curtailed men's access to divorce and polygamy) was non-Islamic. The statement of Ayatollah Khomeini (Ḵomeynī) on the eve of the demonstrations, requiring women working in government offices to observe the "Islamic code" of dress, also made *hejāb* an issue. The authorities ignored these demonstrations, and radio and television (by now under the control of the Islamic forces) denounced them as agitations by promiscuous women and agents of the previous regime. Women continued demonstrating in protest, but they were attacked and harassed by groups of men drawn from the urban poor and religious zealots. Yet the scale of the women's protest was such that the Provisional Government had to modify Khomeini's statement on *hejāb* and to promise to set up new family courts to protect women's rights. It also led to the formation of the National Union of Women, composed mainly of university students, teachers and office workers with pro-Fedāʾīān sympathies (see communism iii). The Union grew into a national organization with centers in most provinces, producing a bi-weekly

newspaper, *Barābarī* (Equality), replaced after six issues by the monthly *Zan dar mobāreza* (Women in struggle), but its activities were curtailed and then halted in 1981 with the increasing ascendancy of the clerical forces and the imprisonment or departure to the West of its members (Azari, 1983, pp. 194-209; Moghissi, 1994, pp. 139-58; Tabari, 1986, pp. 350-54).

Second phase. The Iran-Iraq war (q.v.; 1980-88) and its aftermath were dominated by a phase of Islamization and institutionalization, which gradually brought to women from all walks of life the harsh reality of subjection to the religious law (*šarīʿa*) when applied by the legal machinery of a modern state. While women kept their suffrage rights, a large part of the pre-revolutionary legal reforms was abolished. Men's rights to unilateral divorce and polygamy were reinstituted, women's rights to divorce and child custody were limited, and women were forbidden to study mining and agriculture, to serve as judges, and to appear in public without *ḥejāb*. As in Pahlavi Persia, the state continued to define women's problems, and women's organizations were staffed by women related to the male political elite, by blood or marriage. Many women who at the beginning genuinely, although naively, believed that under an Islamic state women's position would automatically improve, became increasingly disillusioned. These included some early activists—such as Zahra Rahnavard, Aʿẓam Ṭālaqānī and Monīr Gorjī—who had played instrumental roles in discrediting secular feminists and destroying the existing women's press and organizations.

During this phase, despite legal setbacks and other discrimination, paradoxically Islamization and segregation policies became a catalyst for women's increased participation in politics. As the coalition of forces that had brought about the Revolution rapidly collapsed, the religious authorities came to rely more and more on popular support, including large numbers of women. This gave an opportunity for political activity to so-called "traditional" women, who until then had seen politics as beyond their realm. At the same time, women were forced into the labor market by the long drawn-out war with Iraq, and the accompanying rapid price inflation, and the state's moralistic rhetoric and compulsory veiling made women's activity outside the home respectable in the eyes of religious and traditional families. As public space became increasingly Islamic, thus morally correct and safe, these families could no longer thwart their women's wishes to go out to study and work. The unwritten gender codes governing Majles proceedings, which assumed that female members' constituencies consisted solely of women, also

became a strong lobbying force in defense of women's rights. Women parliamentarians devoted all their energies to women's issues; despite their small number (4 in the first three Majleses, 9 in the fourth, and 13 in the fifth, convened respectively in 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992, and 1996), they were able to ensure the airing of women's grievances. Thus, contrary to the assessments and predictions of feminists scholars (Afkhami, 1984, 1994; H. Afshar, 1982, 1987; Azari, 1983; Friedl, 1994; Millet, 1982; Moghissi, 1993, 1994, 1995; Najmabadi, 1991, 1994, 1995; Nashat, 1983; Sanasarian, 1982, 1986, 1992; Tabari, 1982a, 1982b), and also to the intentions of conservative religious authorities inside Persia, women were not only not barred from public life, but their presence and participation actually increased, although in different guises and according to different rules (Adelkhah, 1991, 1992; Higgins, 1985; Jalālī Nāʾīnī 1995a, 1997; Haeri, 1993; Kian, 1995, 1997, 1998; Mir-Hosseini 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Paidar, 1996; Ramazani, 1993; Yavari, 1998).

Third phase. The end of the war with Iraq in 1988 heralded a new era of "Reconstruction" and the emergence of an independent press which carried a critique of official discourses and policies. Gender debates that were harshly suppressed early in the Revolution now resurfaced, but this time in an Islamic format and framework. These debates, conducted publicly in the women's press, revealed a growing dissent and paved the way for a shift in official gender discourses and the enactment of legislation to confront the inequity of men's Shari'a rights. The shift was evident in a number of legislations and policies. Many of the earlier restrictions on subjects women could study were removed (1986); family planning and contraception became freely available (1988); divorce laws were amended so as to curtail men's right to divorce and to compensate women in the face of it (1992), and women were appointed as advisory judges (1992). In short, by the early 1990s many of the early decisions of the revolutionary regime with regard to women had been modified or were at least being debated—a notable exception being the *hejāb* regulations (Hoodfar, 1994, 1996; Kian, 1997; Moghadam, 1988, 1993; Mir-Hosseini, 1996a; Paidar, 1996; Ramazani, 1993; Sanasarian, 1992; Yavari, 1998).

In some ways these modifications represented the official, establishment side of the debates. There was another side, however, aligned with a new trend of thought in post-war and post-Khomeini Persia intent on creating a world view to reconcile Islam with democracy and modernity. This trend sought a dialogue with secular thinkers and offered a radically different interpretation of Islam that had the potential to change the terms of the Islamic Republic's

discourses on women. This is so because it not only challenged orthodox notions of gender in Islam but questioned the very legitimacy in the *šarīʿa* of the laws enforced by the Islamic Republic (Mir-Hosseini, 1999).

These views were first aired in *Zanān* (Women), a women's magazine whose appearance marked the onset of the third phase, in which one could talk of the emergence of a "feminist" voice, in the sense of women speaking for themselves and recognizing a set of demands as explicitly their own. Šahlā Šerkat, founder and editor of *Zanān*, was among the activists who played an important role in the islamicization of the women's press in the early years of the Republic. In 1982 she was invited to join the Kayhān Publishing Institute as editor of *Zan-e rūz*, the most popular and outspoken women's magazine in the pre-revolutionary era. She remained editor until 1991, when she left because of unresolved disagreements over the ways in which gender issues were being addressed. The first issue of *Zanān* appeared seven months later, in February 1992.

Two features of *Zanān*'s feminism and line of argument were novel in the Islamic Republic. First, unlike previous discourses (both Islamic and secular) on women in Persia, *Zanān* did not subordinate women's issues to a wider political project, but advocated them in their own right. Sherkat, having subscribed to the new regime's early position on women, had been involved in its translation from rhetoric into policy. During this process she came to confront its inherent contradictions, and became aware that she could find support in feminism, regardless of its Western baggage, while she could only meet resistance in patriarchy, regardless of its Islamic credentials.

Secondly, *Zanān* advocated a brand of feminism which took its legitimacy from Islam, yet made no apologies for drawing on western feminist sources and collaborating with Persian secular feminists to argue for women's rights. It argued that there is no logical link between patriarchy and Islamic ideals, and no contradiction between fighting for women's rights and remaining a good Muslim. Unlike the mass of post-revolutionary apologetic literature, *Zanān* did not attempt to conceal or rationalize the gender inequalities of the Islamic law, but sought to address them within the context of Islam itself. Some of the articles, written by a male cleric using the language and mode of argumentation of Islamic jurisprudence, not only transported *Zanān*'s message into the heart of the clerical center in Qom, but also forced the authorities there to respond. In so doing, *Zanān* islamicized notions such as the legitimacy of women's choices and their demands for equal treatment, but also became a

forum to which both Islamic and secular feminists contributed. One contributor was lawyer Mehrangīz Kār, whose articles on various aspects of women's legal and political rights featured regularly in the journal (Hoodfar, 1996b; Mir-Hosseini, 1996b, p. 310; Najmabadi, 1998, pp. 65-67).

Zanān had an influence well beyond its small political base, and even induced its own counter-discourse, articulated by both clerics in Qom and women with close links to the political elite and the government. In 1992 the Islamic Propagation Office of Qom Seminaries (Daftar-e tablīḡāt-e eslāmī-e ḥawza-ye ʿelmī-e Qom) launched *Payām-e zan* (Women's message), a monthly journal which aimed to provide an answer to the "woman's question" within the Islamic framework (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a, pp. 160-61; Najmabadi, 1998, pp. 62-64; Yavari, 1998, pp. 219-21). In 1993 appeared the first issue of *Farzāna* (Wise), a quarterly edited by Maʿṣūma Ebtekār (now vice president in charge of environmental protection) and Maḥbūba Ommī (ʿAbbā sqolīzāda) and published by Monīr Gorjī's Center for Women's Studies and Research (Markaz-e moṭālaʿāt o taḥqīqāt-e zanān). With articles in English and Persian, *Farzāna* was the first women's studies journal in Persia; aiming to bring the "woman's question" into the academic domain, it advocated a "top-down" approach, feminism from above. Gorjī's outspoken articles, engaging in Koranic exegesis to show that the Qurʾān does not sanction gender discrimination, were a far cry from her timid objections, as the only women deputy in the 1979 Assembly of Experts, to impositions on women in the name of Islam (Azari, 1982, p. 200; Esfandiari, 1994, pp. 65-66; Yeganeh, 1982, p. 55; Mir-Hosseini, 1999). Ebtekār and Ommī played active parts in preparations for the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing, orchestrated by Šahlā Ḥabībī, the President's adviser on Women's Affairs and head of the Women's Bureau (Jalālī Nāʾīnī 1995b, pp. 99-104). While women in Zanān declined to participate because of the hands-on approach of the government, those in *Farzāna* organized workshops in Persia to familiarize women's NGOs with the working of United Nations conferences, took part in the international meetings at which the Conference Document was shaped, and Ebtekār became a member of the Persian delegation in Beijing.

In this new phase, marked by factional politics and the intensification of struggles between traditionalist and modernist interpretations of Islam, women's issues acquired an urgency similar to that in the early years of the Revolution. But there were signs this time that women were gaining ground in political terms, and that the media, in particular the women's press, had

become a forum for protest and solidarity between secular and religious women. More women joined the modernist forces; some who had previously considered women's issues unimportant joined the debate by the mid-1990s (Aḥmadī Ḵorāsānī, 1995; Kadīvar, 1996; Moṭīʿ, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Kian, 1997, pp. 91-94, 1998, pp. 150-58; Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Najmabadi, 1998, pp. 61-77). More women than before stood in the Majles elections of 1996, and some of them defeated candidates backed by conservatives, not only in Tehran and other larger cities but also in smaller ones. Among them Fāʾeza Rafsanjānī, younger daughter of the then President, polled the second highest vote in Tehran; even higher, it was rumored, than Aḥmad Nāṭeq Nūrī, the conservative choice for the forthcoming presidential elections. She ran on a platform of promoting women's participation in politics, society and sport. Although the thirteen women deputies were not a great increase from the nine in the previous Majles, they became more vocal on women's issues and set up a Women's Commission (Kian, 1997, pp. 86-90). Likewise, women's votes were among the decisive factors in the 1997 presidential elections, when Moḥammad Ḵātamī, the candidate of the modernists, gained an overwhelming victory over the conservatives' candidate, Nāṭeq Nūrī. The women's press, in particular *Zanān*, played a role in informing women of the gender views and policies of these two main candidates (*Zanān* 34, May 1977).

It is too early to assess the impact of the new developments on feminist movement in Persia. Evidently, as before, its fate is to a large extent entangled with wider socio-economic and political developments. What is certain is that the 1979 Revolution acted as a midwife for the birth of an indigenous, locally produced, feminism. In paradoxical ways, the Islamic Republic's rhetoric and policies have facilitated new readings of the sacred texts and likewise the realization of women's increasing demands for equal treatment. Where the gender policies of the Pahlavi regime faced a *šarīʿa*-based opposition, those of the Islamic Republic had to deal with a secular and liberal opposition, both inside and outside Persia. The government and those women active in its sponsored organizations had listened, willy-nilly, to feminist discourses, and in denouncing them they had also had to engage with them—and to adopt some of their elements.

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