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LOCAL SPACES, GLOBAL AUDIENCES

The Role of Local and Global Factors in Shaping the Feminist Movement in Iran

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I. Introduction: Globalization, Feminisms and Islamophobia

Globalization is accompanied by increased consciousness of the world as a whole. This and other effects of globalization have important implications for gender relations and the status of women in all societies.[1] Global processes have an indirect impact on social pressure for democratization in the form of expansion of "social reflexivity and de-traditionalization." As they become better informed about new and varied political alternatives, people become less likely to accept traditional models of political and gender regimes.[2] Globalization "allows for the subversive possibility of women seeing beyond the local to the global." Even those who never physically leave their communities of origin are more likely now to evaluate their own lives by placing their rights, options and restrictions in a comparative

[1]Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1990), 8.

[2]Anthony Giddens, *Beyond the Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 111.

and global perspective.[3] Exposure to geographically different influences and to issues framed in a global context can encourage greater scrutiny of localized traditions and behavior patterns. In some cases, this leads to the construction of new social relationships.

The post-Third Wave era, sometimes known as post-Feminism, is an era where most scholars would claim women's rights is something that can be assumed rather than contested. Feminism is not a singular concept but rather a multifaceted and multidimensional set of ideas that are often contradictory of each other. But, however diverse the ideas may be, all are concerned with women's inferior position in society and the discrimination they face because of the prevailing social, economic, political, or cultural order. The emergence of several diversified forms (or, for some, labels) of feminism—"Liberal" feminism, "Marxist" and "Socialist" feminisms, "Radical" feminism, "French" feminism, "Black" feminism and "Womanism," "Multiracial" feminism, "Individualist" feminism, "Post-structural" and "Post-modern" feminism, "Ecofeminism," etc.—encompasses so many aspects that even the use of the term in a plural sense fails to do it justice.[4] The use of "feminisms" is still at the conceptual level and remains ripe for redefinition.

It is difficult to study gender regimes and women's movements in localities without taking the global context into account. The interaction between history, geography, geopolitics, political economy and culture, women's struggle and agency, and global factors such as intervention by global and regional powers, human rights regimes and feminist networks is integral to understanding the dynamics of religion and politics in the context of feminism. Iran presents an interesting case. It was dominated by an Islamic state, at certain periods, with an experience of a more secular rule in the Shah. While it was never

[3]Zillah Eisenstein, "Women's Publics and the Search for New Democracies," *Feminist Review* 57:1 (1997): 157.

[4]Anupama Chowdhury, "Historicizing, Theorizing, and Contextualizing Feminism," *Journal of English Studies* 4:10 (2009): 29–30.

colonized by a Western power, its upper-class has served as an effective vehicle for the spread of ideas from the outside world.

The feminist movement in Iran, by stressing the historical context of the holy texts, challenging the clergy's monolithic power to interpret, and reformulating Islamic concepts and law from a "feminist" perspective, has paved the way for rethinking gender in the context of Islam. They have opened the doors of (re)interpretation of sacred texts and debates on women's issues to groups other than Muslims.

But they also face reactive gender conservatism and fear of the West prevailing among fundamentalists. In particular, the last two decades saw a growth in the criticism of feminism as being responsible for the spread of "Islamophobia." Islamophobia as a term captures a wide range of sentiments and misconceptions about the religion and its believers. Islamophobia, for the critiques of the feminist movement, creates a caricature of Islam as entirely one dimensional, without any internal differentiation or opinion, and as misogynistic and oppressive to women. This "gendered Islamophobia" stigmatizes the religion even though, compared with other world religions, its treatment of women is arguably preferable and more enlightened.[5]

How did this feminist challenge and the subsequent response become possible? What roles could be attributed to globalization? This article examines the role of local and global factors in rethinking gender in Iran. It looks at the role of history, interpretive frames, repertoires, information, and education in shaping local and global factors responsible for the growth of feminism in Iran. I use the term *space* here as the product of the (re)definition of what it means to be a woman in an Islamic context, in both the public and private spheres. The notion of *audiences* in this case refers to the search for a more global platform for their advocacy and the role of international organizations, feminist networks and the diaspora communities in the process of contending for more and better space for women in Iran.

[5]Muhammad Mahmudul Hasan, "Feminism as Islamophobia: A Review of Misogyny Charges against Islam," *Intellectual Discourse* 20:1 (2012): 55–56.

II. Key Watershed Events in the Feminist Movement in Iran

The feminist movement in Iran shares this characteristic with feminist movements in other countries: it was shaped by history, internal developments and the dynamism of its society, particularly the social praxis of women, as well as external factors, both during colonial times and in the present era of globalization.[6] This section reviews the internal developments in Iran. It also serves as an introduction to succeeding sections on the impact of globalization on the movement.

Writer Aili Mari Tripp identifies three phases of transnational feminist mobilization: 1880–1930, 1945–1975, and 1985–present. The transition across these phases is a two-dimensional process. First, the degree of participation of the "global south" increased, and second, as southern participation increased, so did southern feminists' willingness to advocate the equal rights generally favored all along by the "global north."[7] The transition across these three phases would have an impact in Iran.

Women's organizations were seen as an immediate by-product of the Constitutional Movement of 1903 and were organized around the idea of pushing for one important constitutional provision: public education. Many of these secret societies organized women during protests. One such organization was the *Anjuman-i Hurriyyat-i Vatan* (Homeland Freedom Society), organized in 1907 in the wake of the revolution, and which had 60 women members. The Women's Society (*Anjuman-i Nisvan*) was formed in 1910 with 150 members. They adopted a new name, *Anjuman-i Mukhadarat-I Vatan* (Homeland

[6]Nayereh Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," *Social Research* 69:3 (2002): 852–853.

[7]Aili Mari Tripp, "The Evolution of Transnational Feminisms," in Myra Marx Ferree & Aili Mari Tripp, eds., *Global Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

Ladies Association), in 1911.[8] In 1913, a new group called the *Anjuman Khavatin-i Irani* (Iranian Women's Society), with a reported 5,000 members and extensive connections with the media, was formed.[9]

Women's groups after this period were dominated by women coming from society's upper echelon and were more educated. Their higher level of awareness enabled them to assert the centrality of the "woman question"[10] in Iranian national aspirations. For this group of women, the recognition of women's rights is necessary for Iran to claim its place in the international community of modern and "civilized" countries. This advocacy gave birth to the "grandmother" of feminist organizations in Iran, the Patriotic Women's League. Its preeminence in that period was recognized by other women's organizations and it was seen as the representative of women's concerns. It participated in the Second Eastern Women's Congress held in Tehran. The Iranian government of the 1930s, however, was committed both to consolidating its control over all social and political organizations in Iran and to maintaining local/national standards of feminist progress according to its own definition. The League was therefore caught in a bind: use the state's line against the platform of the Eastern Women's Congress or the platform to embarrass the state into more progress. Co-optation by the state, which resulted in warring factions within, eventually caused the demise of the organization.[11]

This resulted in the birth of the Women's Awakening Project of 1936–1941. The Project demanded that all Iranian women remove

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[8]Camron Michael Amin, "Globalizing Iranian Feminism: 1910–1950," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4:1 (2008): 17.

[9]Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 56–70.

[10]According to Paidar, the way the "woman question" is framed during this period goes this way: How much concession in terms of rights should the state give to women, in order to accommodate the interest of both the clerics and the international community?

[11]Amin, "Globalizing Iranian Feminism: 1910–1950," 18–19.

their veils in public. In exchange, women were to be given greater access to education and state employment. In practice, the benefits of employment and education extended to very few women. The violent enforcement of unveiling and the false official "celebrations" of the Women's Awakening, however, harassed and disturbed many segments of Iranian society.[12]

The founding of the Women's Party in 1943 and the Women's Suffrage Campaign in 1943–1946 opened a new space for feminists to challenge the state. The party was the first independent political organization to declare the political rights of women its primary agenda. The Party sought international legitimacy as an integral part of its strategy to influence official and national official audiences in favor of equal rights for men and women. It was eventually co-opted by a renascent state feminism effort and it subsequently moderated its tone.[13] In 1946, the Women's Party changed its name to the less partisan-sounding Women's Council, seemingly to permit affiliation with a wider circle of women's groups.[14]

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a broad-based movement to overthrow Mohammed Reza Shah. The array of political groups came from all over the spectrum and various social forces: leftists, nationalists, Islamists, the middle class, the working class, the urban poor, the intelligentsia, men and women.[15] Ideological theorists of the new Islamic Republic adopted a gender discourse based on the work of Ali Shari'ati, the popular leftist Islamic theorist of the revolution.[16]

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[12]Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zanha-yi Millat: Women or Wives of the Nation?" *Iranian Studies* 26:1 (1993): 53.

[13]Amin, "Globalizing Iranian Feminism: 1910–1950," 19.

[14]Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 127.

[15]Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," in T. Saliba, C. Allen, & J. Howard, eds., *Gender, Politics, and Islam* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 17.

[16]Catherine Sameh, "Discourses of Equality, Rights and Islam in the One Million Signatures Campaign in Iran," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12:3–4 (2010): 445.

The model evoked by Shari'ati during this period was Fatima.[17] For him and the regime, Fatima represented what an ideal woman should be as "she took on responsibilities and became socially engaged, equal to men but in a different way."[18]

This "separate but equal" doctrine was seen by the regime as an antidote to the Western notion of a "highly individualistic and sexually objectified" woman, as well as a response to women's seclusion within patriarchal notions of Islam.[19] In effect, what the regime was trying to do was appeal to the anti-imperialist sentiments which ended the reign of the Shah. From a more conservative vein, Khomeini also argued for women's freedom within Islam. For him, Islam has never been against women's freedom. The goal of the revolution was to give her back the dignity that was taken away by the "consumerist, sexually exploitative and individualist trends" promoted by Westofixication during the Shah's reign.[20]

Post-revolutionary Iran was a period of varying opportunities for women. The consolidation of the Islamic state was followed by the mandatory imposition of *hejab*.[21] Women were also excluded from certain occupations and educational fields. Rights, within the family, earned during the shah era[22] were repealed and this signaled a serious defeat for women who had been promised greater equality under revolutionary Islam.[23]

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[17]Mohammed's daughter.

[18]Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (London: Yale University, 2003), 5.

[19]Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 5.

[20]E. Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), 117.

[21]Refers to both the veil and the act of wearing it.

[22]For example, a family law which restricted polygamy and the unilateral right of men to divorce women were among the first targets of the new Islamic regime.

[23]Sameh, "Discourses of Equality, Rights and Islam in the One Million Signatures Campaign in Iran," 447.

The symbolism of the *hejab* is very important here. For women of this period, the veil is an instrument of male domination. For them, if the world was not shaped by this domination, there would be no need for the *hejab.*[24] Seen as a symbol operating within a system, the feminists of this period attempted to subvert a religious and social meaning. Religion had become a repository of traditional values that could be selectively used.

Forced sex segregation and attacks on civil rights during this period contributed to the growing disillusionment that resulted in a turning against the Islamic regime. The challenge came not only from the secular opposition but from new religious intellectuals and an increasing number of Muslim reformers. They articulated demands for revision in the interpretation of Islamic texts, reform in the sharia and the secularization of the legal system—the separation of the Church and the State. This challenge came in the form of a faith-based framework (Islamic feminists), through various schools of secular feminism, women activists, and intellectuals of diverse inclinations.[25] Women were the first to show signs of resistance to the new regime in the form of rallies, militant street demonstrations, and sit-ins. When faced with harsh repression, they continued to pursue a subtle yet persistent form of resistance.[26]

Based on the review of key events, it could be surmised that the feminist movement in Iran cannot be positioned as a monolithic body of individuals and organizations who agree on a single view of the place of women in an Islamic context. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Before delving therefore into how they sought to "rethink" gender in the context of Islam, it is useful to characterize the various

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[24]Kevin McDonald, *Global Movements: Action and Culture* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 188.

[25]This includes members of the Shia majority and minorities such as Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Bahai, and Sunni activists.

[26]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 858–860.

approaches which actors within the movement have employed as well as their relative positions in relation to each other and with the state.

Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian women's attempts to establish transnational networks and international connections have been divided into three approaches: missionary and ideological, diplomatic and pragmatist, and integrative and networking.[27] These three approaches have roots in developmental stages of the movement at the beginning of the 20th century.

The missionary approach is associated with the ruling hardliners. Their main purpose is to establish international contacts to propagate their idea of Muslim womanhood to the rest of the world. This view, as was mentioned earlier, is symbolized by Fatima, who represents a patriarchal gender model which emphasizes sex differences and sex-based division of labor. This includes the Women's Society of Islamic Revolution which was later on replaced by the Women's Society of the Islamic Republic, with the latter founded by the female relatives of Khomeini. As an ideology, the brand of Islamism being exported by these women impacted various communities differently. For instance, in one community it may have resulted in violence against women not wearing the *hejab*, while in others it may have triggered an interest in the wearing of the headscarves.[28] These communities are not only located inside Iran—they also include those in other countries.[29]

The pragmatists have gradually replaced the "missionaries." They are mostly drawn from the ranks of professional and highly educated Iranian women.[30] They are very active in international conferences and

[27]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 858–860.

[28]Golnar Mehran, "The Presentation of the Self and the Post-Revolutionary Textbooks," in Nikki Keddie & Rudi Mathee, *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 232–233.

[29]For example, Sudan and Algeria.

[30]They are also well-connected to state organs and to the bureaucracy.

seek to establish international connections in order to improve Iran's gender image. In the course of their experience with sexist barriers both locally and globally, they have become more open-minded, pragmatic, and conscious of women's rights. This movement away from the radical and the ideological was due in part to the UN-sponsored regional and world conferences on women's rights.[31] Feminists coming from this group will be vital in "globalizing" the movement.

The last category of feminists in Iran is more integrative and networked. They are made up of independent Iranian women activists inside and outside Iran. Just like the pragmatists, they also seek international connections with women's organizations in various parts of the world. Their purposes have included earning publicity for their efforts, exchanging ideas and experiences, gaining a support network and solidarity in their fight against sexism and repression in Iran, and becoming a united part of the international women's movement. The size and diversity of this category has been increasing. More women, religious and secular as well as members of religious minorities inside and outside Iran, joined the forces of the reform movement because of their disillusionment with the Islamic state.[32]

III. Rethinking Gender: The Role of Global Factors

This section focuses on the role of global and local factors in shaping the rethinking of gender in Iran. It will look at the experiences of the movement beginning in the 1970s, especially those of the pragmatist and integrative/networking approaches. It will also outline how the movement has moved over the years from a more secular brand of feminism into a very distinct form of radicalism: Islamic Feminism. It is divided into three sections: Feminism in the Revolutionary Era, Developments in the 1990s, and The Birth of Modern Islamic Feminism.

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[31]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 870–873.

[32]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 873.

A. Feminism in the Revolutionary Era

The influence of global factors can clearly be seen in the first display of defiance by women in 1979. This protest coincided with the celebration of International Women's Day on March 8. The day of celebration eventually turned into a weeklong protest against the new burdens of women. As was mentioned in the previous section, these include the declaration of mandatory veiling, the removal of reforms on women's rights, and the removal of women judges from the courts. One of the most prominent slogans of that protest was, "*Freedom is neither Eastern nor Western, It is universal.*"[33] Such messages were dismissed as products of bourgeoisie thinking and Westoxification by leftists, nationalists and Islamists.[34] The protest and the banners were not only an attempt to provide a universal account of their struggle, but also an attempt to show that their struggle had an authentic national background with indigenous roots dating back one hundred years.[35]

The 1970s saw a flourishing of global feminism in official and non-official venues. This could be seen in the different regional and world conferences on women which have been sponsored mainly by the United Nations since 1975. Accompanying forums of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) gave rise to global cooperation among different women's organizations and the blossoming of a global feminist consciousness.[36] Among the grassroots groups and transnational feminist networks which have arisen in Iran are the Network of East/

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[33]Emphasis is mine.

[34]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 860–861.

[35]This was during the early years of modernist reform, especially in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911. It is interesting to note that in that earlier period, women were simply concerned with pushing for public education. The expansion of their advocacy which now includes an array of concerns is a reflection of the global trend.

[36]Fereshteh Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," *Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion* 22:2 (2006): 53.

West Women, *Encuentros Feministas*, Women Living under Muslim Laws, and the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights.[37]

Even conflict has found its way into the process of the struggle for women's rights. The first decade of the Islamic regime coincided with the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988. Members of the women's movements faced brutal repression from the theocratic regime. However, as the need for labor increased, they became successful in lobbying for more employment opportunities for women.[38] The death of Khomeini in 1989 not only created a relaxation in terms of culture, arts, film, and music, but also a rivalry for succession, ideological friction, and a gradual exhaustion of revolutionary zeal in the decade-long repression and pointless war which killed thousands. The post-war reconstruction project (*sazandegi*) promoted by Khomeini's successor, Hashemi Rafsanji, paved the way for the growth of intellectual debate, spiritual reflection and secular activism, especially among women. Liberal clerics supported economic liberalization. A population explosion forced the state to launch a successful family planning campaign which gave women access to contraception.[39]

B. Developments in the 1990s

In 1990, Iran was granted a seat on the 45-member UN Commission on the Rights of Women. It was further exposed to global discourses on women's rights and pressured to comply with some internationally accepted standards. This gave birth to women's sports and transnational games as another active arena[40] for international contacts and connection

[37]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 854–856.

[38]While this might have been the case, women were still confined to "low risk" jobs and those that are considered for "those with nimble fingers," such as assembly line jobs in munitions and equipment factories.

[39]Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," 18–20.

[40]Fa'ezeb Hashemi , an active sportswoman and daughter of former president Hashemi Ralsanjani, played an important role in this area.

building.[41] The 1995 Beijing Conference on Women is also an interesting case. One of the UN requirements for a delegation to participate in the Beijing Conference was the preparation of a reliable national report on women's conditions. During the preparatory meetings for Beijing, many elite Islamist women were compelled to come up with a reliable report.[42] The prepared report, which noted the lack of accurate statistics about women, was sent for review and subsequently went through revisions to ensure compliance. After the 1995 world conference on women in Beijing, an amazing array of women-oriented NGOs developed in Iran and have since included, in their advocacy, accurate information on women's conditions on the ground.[43]

Another key global element that needs to be explored is the role of women migrants and diaspora communities abroad, especially in the West. Because Iran was never colonized, language is a barrier that needs to be broken, especially when we begin to think of language not only as a means of establishing connections but also in the sense of the global feminist discourse.[44] The growth in the number of educated Iranian women abroad also resulted in the growth of Iranian women's organizations in Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia.

As of 1999,[45] there were 97 Iranian women's rights groups concentrated among those continents. The activities of these women

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[41]Mehran, "The Presentation of the Self and the Post-Revolutionary Textbooks," 252.

[42]Apparently, it revealed an embarrassing situation regarding women, and so was held up and went through several changes. This example of the eye-opening, educational, and challenging process of preparation for a world conference on women brought home the relevance of women's studies and feminist literature which will be discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

[43]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 870.

[44]Primarily English, but Iranian women also had to learn other major European languages such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

[45]More accurate recent figures are not available, but many reports, such that of Badran, note an increase. See Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What's in

include raising international awareness and mobilizing international pressure, especially on violations of women's rights. They were also instrumental in supplying women activists inside Iran with materials and scholarly works published abroad and in carrying out research on women in Iran.[46]

While the movement has been very active and has contributed enormously to the struggle for women's rights in Iran, it has remained largely secular in nature. Moreover, despite the campaign having been widespread, it has been a failure largely due to the absolute power of fundamentalists over the state's institutions. The answer to this problem is the involvement of elite Iranian women in the struggle.[47] The period in the 1990s is oftentimes cited by students of feminism in Iran as the birth of modern Islamic Feminism. According to scholars, Islamist Feminism is a 20th century phenomenon, even though it is supposed in the world of politics that Islamist movements signify a trend that ushers in a return to the medieval Islamic period.[48]

C. The Birth of Modern Islamic Feminism

How possible is it to talk about Islamic Feminism which seems, in and of itself, a contradiction of terms? According to noted feminist scholar and advocate Margot Badran, it could be understood as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm." This classification therefore includes both those Muslim women activists who identify themselves as Islamic feminists and those who do not, and also those women who are in power and those who are not.[49]

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a Name?" *Al-Ahram Weekly* 569:2 (2002), http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm (accessed March 9, 2013).

[46]Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," 877–879.

[47]Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," 34.

[48]Said Amir Arjomand, "Islam, Political Change and Globalization," *Thesis Eleven* 76:1 (2004): 9–11.

[49]Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?"

The basic methodologies of Islamic Feminism combine both traditional Islamic methodologies—*ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the *Qur'an*). Islamic feminists use methods and tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc. rooted in post-modernism, something that is drawn as well from the global feminist discourse.[50] One essential point of postmodern feminist critique is that it focuses not only on the power hidden in relations of domination, which many face in everyday life, but also on the ideological forces that authorize and sustain these relations of domination.[51]

A feminist reading of Islam is almost unavoidable. This is because Islam is a part no longer of the oppositional discourse, but rather the *discourse in power.* The *Shari'a* became the basis of the legal system of the Islamic state and its custodians had to deal with contradictory aims. On one hand, they had to uphold the family and restore women to their "true and high" status in Islam while at the same time upholding men's *Shari'a* prerogatives on the other. A major argument of Islamic feminists is that some verses in the *Qur'an* cannot be employed in modern times. They draw primarily from the arguments of Abdol Karim Soroush,[52] which distinguish between the "essentials" and "accidentals" of Islam. The essentials *(zati*) in Islam are those that cannot be changed. The essentials of Islam are elements without which Islam is not Islam. There are yet others, which he calls "accidentals" (*arazi*), which are the results of the special time and place Mohammed was born into and socialized. For example, *tawheed* (Oneness of God) is an essential because "it could not have been otherwise." It was

[50]Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," 36.

[51]Judith Butler & Joan W. Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 58.

[52]He is known as the "Martin Luther of Shiite Islam" for his reformist ideas. In the early days of the Islamic Republic, he was one of the most prolific and eloquent intellectuals of the Islamic Revolution and a member of the Council for Cultural Revolution. He is now regarded as one of the most rebellious and learned critics of clerical rule in Iran.

accidental that the prophet was born in Arabia and therefore that the language of Islam is Arabic, something that according to Soroush significantly shaped the conceptual framework of the *Qur'an*.[53]

Thus, as the argument goes, rather than being a manifesto, the *Shari'a* is a product of a particular cultural interpretation and cannot put forward immutable answers to the questions of a given historical period. Iranian Islamic feminists demand that the *Shari'a* needs to be reinterpreted on the basis of a feminist approach and new laws deduced according to contemporary needs.[54] Iranian Islamic feminists employ in their analyses some of postmodernism's conceptual tools. A large part of this is the recognition of "multiple truths, multiple roles, and multiple realities" as part of postmodern feminists' focus.[55] Iranian Islamic feminists also favor postmodernists' rejection of an essential nature of women. That postmodern feminism offers a useful philosophy for diversity in feminism, because of its acceptance of multiple truths and rejection of essentialism, is just what Islamic feminism needs for legitimizing itself in the feminist discourse. Besides the acceptance of diversity, Iranian Islamic feminists also adhere to a postmodernist view of language: a mechanism of institutional control. In particular, they have criticized not only the *Qur'an* and the *Shari'a*, but the Bible as well, as being rooted in a male interpretation of doctrine and a male interpretation of God.[56]

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[53]Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," 37–39.

[54]According to Keddie, for example, the role of women in the Shari'a was influenced by Mediterranean emphasis on female virginity and chastity as central to male honor. This has something to do with the difficult terrain and mixed settlement in the region, which threatens genealogical purity.

[55]Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 54.

[56]Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," 36.

A very good example is the rereading of the story of Adam's rib concerning the origin of women. In most *hadith*,[57] woman comes from that rib and that is used as a basis for arguing that in all matters, men precede women.[58] The feminist reinterpretation consists in going back to the *Qur'an*. The garden story, for feminists, shows the equality between men and women. They are both equally capable of making choices such as disobeying God (and eating the forbidden fruit). After all, in Islam both men and women are expected to perform the five ritual duties.[59]

Another mainstream interpretation relates to marriage. Men are allowed to have as many as four wives provided they can support them. The children of a marriage belong to the husband. A wife may only obtain divorce from her husband if she pays a certain sum. For Islamic feminists, marriage is a contract involving the consent of both parties. Men are also required to take care of their wives and should provide for their maintenance after the separation.[60]

The last 25 years since the Iranian revolution saw a flourishing of cultural products generated by Iranian feminists. The growing number of women's organizations and institutes, as well as a variety of women's journals now being published in Iran, attest to the significance of rethinking women's gender roles. Some of these journals, such as *Zanan*,[61] explicitly define themselves as feminist-oriented and are

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[57]Reports or sayings of the deeds or sayings of Mohammed transmitted to his companions.

[58]Nayereh Tohidi & Jane H. Bayes, "Women Redefining Modernity and Religion in the Globalized Context," in Nayereh Tohidi & Jane H. Bayes, eds., *Globalization, Gender and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 24–26.

[59]Herbert Bodman, "Introduction," in Herbert Bodman & Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 1998), 5.

[60]Tohidi & Bayes, "Women Redefining Modernity and Religion in the Globalized Context," 26–27.

[61]*Zanan* is the most important journal in Iran that articulates the Islamic feminists' ideas. During the past years, *Zanan* has become one of the most

embarking on a project of thorough and radical interpretations of Islamic sources about women's rights.[62]

A new trend is emerging among Islamic feminists in Iran. Islamic feminists now use theories and methodologies of both Islamic and secular schools. A good example of secular and Islamic feminists' cooperation concerns the right of women to work as lawyers, as well as a joint protest campaign in 1999 against the ban of women judges. Another example is the participation of several secular women activists in the divergent roundtable discussions that Islamic feminists have held. Islamic feminism in Iran has extended the domain of feminist dialogue in the country, not only to include secular women but also clerical scholars (*ulema*).[63] Women in this case have not only taken advantage of this cooperation between secular and Islamic feminists; they have also taken advantage of the role of debate in determining orthodoxy in Islam. Gender issues and women's rights have taken the forefront in these debates.

Increased crackdowns against dissidents and the renewed control of Parliament by hardliners resulted in 2,000 women staging a sit-in, calling for the revision of the Constitution, in front of the University of Tehran in 2005. They were joined by Iran's famous living poet, Simini Behbahani. They also received widespread support from Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu, feminist and human rights

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significant documents for studying Islamic feminism until it was closed down in 2002.

[62]Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism," *Critical Inquiry* 32:4 (2006): 630.

[63]Ahmadi, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context," 45. For the first time, Shi'a clerics in the *Qhom*, the center of religious and political power of Shi'a clerics, were "obliged" to open their doors to a Muslim feminist woman with a University of Cambridge doctorate in anthropology (Ziba Mir-Hosseini), who engaged in a challenging face-to-face debate on gender issues with several prominent Islamic ulema. Most of the interviewed clerics were those who had or still have strong connections with governmental positions in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

lawyer Shriin Ebadi, the Islamic Students Association, and various NGOs and webloggers.[64] This is further testament to the kind of international support that the movement receives.

In celebration of this event a year later, they staged another sit-in in *Haft-e Tir* Square. This protest called for reforms in Islamic Law. In particular, they called for a ban on polygamy, equal rights to divorce for women and men, joint custody of children after divorce, equal rights in marriage, an increase in the minimum legal age of marriage for girls to 18, and equal rights for women as witnesses. The state security's response was violent: they broke off the rally and some protesters were beaten and arrested.[65]

Two months later, women's rights activists launched the One Million Signatures Campaign (OMSC). Through door-to-door contact, the Internet, meetings, and public conferences, the campaign, as the title implies, aims to generate one million signatures in support of changes to discriminatory laws against women.[66] The second phase of the campaign involves working with legal experts in order to draft new laws to replace unjust ones. The campaign uses three approaches. First, it builds on Islamic feminist and reformist discourse to articulate women's equality within an Islamic human rights framework. Second, it aims to reconcile the Iranian approach which works to foreground the campaign as a distinctly Iranian, as opposed to Western-influenced, project that deserves support from a modern Islamic state.[67] The organization has

[64]Sameh, "Discourses of Equality, Rights and Islam in the One Million Signatures Campaign in Iran," 447.

[65]Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?" (June 16, 2006), http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061606.html (accessed March 9, 2013).

[66]Updates on the campaign are available at the campaign's website, Change for Equality (http://www.campaignforequality.info).

[67]Sameh, "Discourses of Equality, Rights and Islam in the One Million Signatures Campaign in Iran," 449.

chapters in Iran and in places as far as California.[68] Coupled with a robust multi-lingual presence on the Internet, the campaigners were successful in framing the movement as both local and transnational.

IV. Conclusion: What Space? Which Audiences?

In examining the interaction between Islam, human rights, global connections between different organizations, and women's personal sense of agency, it is useful to return to how Robins conceptualized the dynamic interface between culture and identity in the new global context. Globalization may bring about convergence and *homogenization* in world culture. More cosmopolitan developments bring about encounters which produce *hybridization*. However, there are groups which respond to global upheavals by returning to their roots, religious traditions and fundamentals. The last type of response can be characterized as a *resurgence* of indigenous culture.[69]

A. Changing Spaces

The global resurgence of political Islam is a response to liberalism, secular nationalism, and secular socialism. It was brought about in part by the failure of modern secular nationalism and socialist states to deliver balanced economic, political and cultural development. The feelings of uncertainty, generated by these failures, invite a sense of localism and even tribalism.[70] In the case of Iran, it was a response to the perception of a corruption of culture and belief as well as the failure to deliver, in a number of key socio-economic areas, by the Shah regime. The resulting difficulties have been framed by the Islamic

[68]"One Million Signatures Campaign Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws," Change for Equality (2006), http://www.campaignforequality.info/english/spip.php?article18 (accessed March 9, 2013).

[69]Kevin Robins, "What in the World's Going On?" in P. Dugay, ed., *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 33.

[70]See Tohidi & Bayes (2001).

revolutionaries of 1979 as an evil produced by "Westoxification," the Western corruption of Iranian society.

Indeed, gender is a central dimension in the crises of identity brought about by globalization. The integration of women in labor markets, the shifts of power relations between men and women, the presence of women in institutions, and access to printing, scripture and social media have placed gender on the center stage.[71] The revival of patriarchal codes, veiling and sex segregation in Iran cannot simply be reduced to a religious revival, or a religious reaction, but rather as a response to the larger issue of identity. It is, in a sense, a discourse of the powerless and the powerful. Islamists are faced with a threat of cultural homogenization and they therefore try to control "others" in their midst: women. Modernized women are viewed as agents of the Western enemy and an integral part of the Western imperialism project. This is where women attempted to challenge access and control of a *space*: the definition of what it means to be a woman in an Islamic context, in both the public and the private sphere. Over time, the conception by female dissidents and the ruling male elite of what this space means is a story of constant negotiation and renegotiation, sometimes open and violent, sometimes subtle and in secret.

In the course of the movement's history, this space was conceived around access to public education, removal of the *hejab*, the right of suffrage, women in the labor force and, in the post-revolutionary era, the bigger question of women's place in orthodox Islamic doctrine, which encompasses both the public and private role of women. The last one presents an interesting paradox: how men cannot anymore invoke the support of women without more space in the public and the private sphere. The sense of "awakened agency" among women resulted in their refusal to return to play the role of obedient housewives and mothers and have instead began to demand for civil rights and equal status. Male elites, in turn, have recognized the role

[71]Minoo Moallem, "Transnationalism, Feminism and Fundamentalism," in Elizabeth A. Castelli, ed., *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 119–148.

that women have in retaining state power and have become more flexible and pragmatic. This resulted in significant concessions in the post-revolutionary years.[72]

The adoption of a more global discourse on feminism has strengthened the position of women in contesting this space. The incorporation of the traditional Islamic methodologies, such as *ijtihad* and *tafsir*, and the post-modern tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology and anthropology prove to be interesting. This has allowed women to contend for space in an Islamic context but, at the same time, do away with the label of "agents of Westernization," a tag which still generates antagonism in parts of Iran. The meeting of the global feminist discourse and traditional methods has allowed them extraordinary leverage to question and interpret traditional Islamic doctrine.

B. Different Audiences

The notion of *audiences* in this case refers to several things: the search for a more global platform for their advocacy, the role of international organizations, feminist networks, and the diaspora communities.

Since the early part of the campaign, Iranian feminists have been involved in spreading their ideas and advocacies outside of the Iranian state. With increased access to communication, women were able to bring international attention to their concerns. The UN and the various conferences were also useful avenues for women to challenge the male-dominated government outside of its borders. In an atmosphere where there is limited space for contention, this seems like a natural response.

The diaspora community has been instrumental in raising international awareness, mobilizing international pressure, and in carrying out research and increasing the awareness of women inside Iran. Religion has not only enabled them to find a link to home; it has enabled them to contrast themselves as well as learn from the "Other," especially the language of the global feminist discourse.

[72]Tohidi & Bayes (2001: 39–41).

Transnational connections generate campaigns which have the possibility of creating what Reed and Foran referred to as "cultures of political opposition." These cultures, as manifested by individuals, groups and organizations, create the possibility for radical ways of giving meaning to the period that they are living through.[73] In the case of Iran, the campaign for human rights within an Islamic framework and women's equality discourses, such as the One Million Signatures Campaign, have been successful at building on the shifting social practices, beliefs and desires of millions of Iranian women and men who have adopted a different version of Islam from that of the ruling Islamic hardliners.

Better educated women have taken lead roles in movements, such as in Iran. Their role in these movements, however, has changed. Instead of a submissive and sheltered role, they have found a legitimate and accepted social space for political activism.[74] Indeed, the role of education in the development of feminist movements in Iran cannot be overemphasized. Since 1989, the enrollment rate of women, especially in tertiary education, has been steadily increasing. In the last ten years, for instance, 60 percent of those who passed the college entrance examinations in Iran were women. In Shavarini's 2005 study, many women who went to college to get a degree did so to gain respect and independence as well as run away from "controlling" family environments. Later on, they became part of a pool of professionals who have a different understanding of gender roles from that of their very conservative families.[75]

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[73]Jean-Pierre Reed & John Foran, "Political Cultures of Opposition: Exploring Idioms, Ideologies, Revolutionary Agency in the Case of Nicaragua," *Critical Sociology* 28:3 (2002): 338–339.

[74]Janet Bauer, "The Mixed Blessings of Women's Fundamentalism: Democratic Impulses in a Patriarchal World," in Judy Brink & Joan Mencher, eds., *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross-Culturally* (New York: Routeledge, 1997), 223.

[75]Mitra Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," *Review of Education* 53:1 (2005): 337–340.

Evidence from three surveys conducted in Iran from 2000–2003 indicate that educated young women in Iran are significantly more likely to work outside the home, marry later, give birth later, have fewer children, and have more egalitarian marriages than other Iranian women. Surprising numbers of older Iranians also espoused feminist attitudes. The majority of respondents in a nationally representative sample of urban Iranians identify themselves as advocates of women's rights.[76] There is indeed a lot to hope for in the direction which the movement is going: towards greater *spaces*, more *audiences*.

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[76]Charles Kurzman, "A Feminist Generation in Iran?" *Iranian Studies* 41:3 (2008): 320–321.

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