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Active Resisters: The Women of Post-Revolution Iran

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Abstract

In this paper, I challenge the notion that Muslim or Middle Eastern women are passive acceptors of discrimination. After examining how Iranian women resisted governmental discrimination following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, I consider a number of factors that may have led to the reversal of some of these discriminatory policies in the 1990's. How much of an effect did women's demands for equality have on the government's decisions? This question of effectiveness introduces a longtime debate between Islamic feminists, who advocate for working with the theocratic government and using Islam to frame their demands for equality, and secular feminists, who advocate for using legal and political systems to reach a similar goal. Following a critical evaluation of each approach, the question evolves into whether a radical or a resonant frame is more effective. After taking into account the masculinity and power complexes of government leaders, I suggest that a resonant approach is in a unique position to successfully manipulate the government, which could lead to the reversal of discriminatory policies. However, the women's rights movement will be most powerful if the two sides put aside their differences and unite in the fight against discrimination.

Keywords

Iran, feminism, Islam, women

Disciplines

Islamic Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Women's Studies

Comments

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Active Resisters: The Women of Post-Revolution Iran

Sofia Mouritsen

The idea of Muslim or Middle Eastern women as passive acceptors of discrimination is unfounded and misleading. Rather, women often actively resist oppression, a phenomenon that is perhaps increasingly present when a state's government closely interacts with religion. Despite this, not all women regard religion as the problem; in fact, many Muslim feminists believe that Islam can be transformed into an effective solution. However, the feminist discourse is divided about whether a secular or religious approach is the most effective. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which culminated in a new government that quickly rescinded many of women's rights and protections, Iranian women resisted governmental discrimination but also became divided over how to overcome it, and they continue to debate the effectiveness of secular and religious framing today.

Under Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution of 1978-79 and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, discrimination against women blossomed in the years following the revolution. In the past, Family Protection Laws had protected many of women's rights, including a higher marriage age for girls, restrictions on polygamy, and the right to divorce one's husband, but Khomeini abolished these laws in 1979 (Moghadam 2002, 1138). He also revoked women's rights to serve as judges, segregated certain activities, and made the hijab mandatory (Sedghi 2007, 201). Hamideh Sedghi suggests that these discriminations were integral in building a new state identity, specifically one that was "Islamic, anti-imperialist, and anti-Westernist" (201). Even if the Iranian people did not agree with Khomeini's actions, he

successfully created a fresh image of Iran, and women's basic protections were slashed in the name of the new state.

The effects of these actions were deleterious, and the statistics proved it: Within a few years, fertility was on the rise, rates of female education were spiraling downward, and the population soared. The value of women seemed to have been increasingly measured in the amount of children she produced, a traditional view likely rooted in Qur'anic passages exalting the status of the mother. Women, more illiterate and less educated than before, were disappearing from the workforce. Valentine Moghadam concludes that these statistics were a sign that male domination was being reinforced while women's autonomy was being compromised (Moghadam 2002, 1138). This certainly seems to be the case. Things looked bleak for Iranian women.

However, women resisted this discrimination. For example, activists from both secular and religious orientations demonstrated against the new law making the hijab mandatory: They wrote articles, held meetings, appealed to international women's organizations, gave lectures, and attended rallies (Sedghi 2007, 204). The conservative forces in the government tried to silence these women, who were forced to go underground, but the movement did not die off. The liberals in the government were no help either; they chose to ignore gender issues and instead focus on "nationalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-monarchical tendencies" (205). Despite the fact that they were on their own, women resisted the idea that their place was in the home, and many chose to be active in the public sphere, taking advantage of anything that they could still legally participate in.

Finally, in the 1990's, the wind shifted. Had the women been successful in resisting? Partially, but other factors were involved in the reversal of some discriminatory policies.

Importantly, the death of Khomeini gave women a political opening to have their voices heard. The new government still believed that a woman's place was in the home, but it also listened to some of the demands of women and conceded the importance of women's involvement in the professional sphere (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013, 47). However, this was all in the context of a government that sought economic liberalization and integration into the global economy. Could Iran's reversal of some of its sexist policies have simply been a strategy to get the outside world to look more favorably upon it? This seems likely. The government has proved its willingness to act strategically before, as in the case of reproductive rights. In early 1990's, when the government realized that the population had gotten out of hand, it began promoting birth control and the notion that a smaller family was a happier and healthier family (Tober 2006, 53-54). The government acted because it was facing an economic crisis, not because it was sensitive to social issues and women's psychological and physical health.

Additionally, the 1980-1988 war with Iraq opened up opportunities for female employment in the public sector even before Khomeini's death in 1989. Moghadam notes that "these jobs went to ideologically correct women, but their very presence suggested both the determination of women and the flexibility of the Islamic regime" (Moghadam 2002, 1139). But does it? It seems to suggest the pragmatism of the government above all. It is likely that, because of the war, the presence of the women in the workforce was necessary. Although women were allowed to enter the public sector because of a need for professionals, the regime did not unbend enough to relax its ideological biases; after all, there was still no place in the workforce for women who disagreed with the government.

Furthermore, although women were not banned from assuming public roles, they were still discouraged from doing so. This does not indicate the flexibility of the government, either;

rather, it reinforces the idea of the government's cautious pragmatism and perhaps its fear of a "slippery slope". For example, the government might be concerned that, if women were granted liberal employment opportunities, they would pour into the workforce and begin to make even more outrageous demands. However, although the regime's pragmatism seems to have played a substantial role in the loosening of employment policies, there is no doubt that women's determination also played a role. But how much of an impact did women's demands for equality actually have on the regime's decisions to loosen discriminatory policies?

This is a question that plagues many feminists who seek to understand the best way to achieve change. Islamic feminists, who advocate for working with the theocratic government, may point to the improvements that were brought about in the 1980s and 1990s as evidence that it is possible to work with the government. In addition to the concessions previously mentioned, these improvements included permission for women to run for parliament and to work in the civil service (Moghadam 2002, 1139). Islamic feminists might argue that, because these policy improvements occurred without a radical campaign against the government, there is no need to completely defy the theocracy. Islamic feminists may believe that their use of a religious frame will allow them to convince the government to reverse its discriminatory laws. After all, how could a theocracy reject proposals justified by the same religion that informs its own decisions?

It true that Islamic feminists were important in the successful reversal of some discriminatory policies. Even Moghadam, a self-described skeptic of the Islamic feminist movement, attributes the lifting of educational and employment barriers to the "agitation by activist Islamic women" (Moghadam 2002, 1140). But when considering this, one must recall the pragmatic nature of the Iranian government. Although barriers against women were lifted at least

partially by Islamic feminists, does this prove the effectiveness of Islamic feminism? Perhaps not.

The Islamic feminist argument is based on the idea that the government makes policy decisions based mainly on its interpretation of Islam, and if women frame their policy demands using the Qur'an, the government will accept these policies more readily. This argument seems sound until the first assumption is questioned. What if the government does not make policy decisions based mainly on its interpretation of Islam? What if the Iranian regime is even more pragmatic than it appears, and it makes decisions based mainly on economic factors? What if Islam, instead of being the most important factor in the government's decisions, is instead used as a justification and as a way to give the government legitimacy?

Given the government's history of cautious pragmatism, this is entirely possible. If it is indeed the case, the Islamic feminists' argument may be greatly weakened. Let us consider a hypothetical scenario. If a progressive policy with no economic benefit was proposed by Islamic feminists, the government could reject it outright, or it could accept the Islamically framed argument in order to save face and retain its identity as a regime disciplined by Islamic law. However, the government could also reject the progressive policy because of its lack of economic benefit and frame its own rejection of the policy using Islam. The many interpretations of the Qur'an and the authority of the government make this third option very plausible indeed, since it would allow the regime to dodge an economically detrimental policy while retaining the legitimacy it is granted by Islam.

Perhaps it was a thought process similar to this that led secular feminists to critique Islamic feminism and propose their own solutions. Secular feminists believe that, instead of debating theological interpretations that, in their opinion, will never be resolved anyway, women

should focus on using legal and political systems to work towards equality. Secular feminists would much rather explore socioeconomic and political questions rather than theological ones (Moghadam 2002, 1158-1160), and they critique the government on the basis of human rights, international agreements, and a world standard instead of relying on fresh interpretations of the Qur'an (Sreberny and Torfeh 2103, 53). Is this approach a more effective one?

It is difficult to say. Pressuring the Iranian government by referring to international agreements could be effective, but only if the other signatories of such agreements had an economic relationship with Iran and were legitimately committed to human rights. States often turn a blind eye to some of the less desirable actions of their trade partners, and as a result, many "minor" human rights violations tend to slide under the global radar. Unless other states were significantly worried about the actions of Iran, there would not likely be economic repercussions and therefore no incentive for the government to cooperate with secular feminists.

Still, secular feminists generally believe that they have an edge when it comes to long-term improvements for women. They believe that using Islam to justify feminist demands is limited and can only lead to minor successes. Secular feminists disparage the efforts of Islamic feminists as "at best a very limited project and at worst a way of legitimizing the Islamic legal, political, and moral framework" (Moghadam 2002, 1151). Instead of using the Qur'an as a source of legitimacy, some feminists prefer to make use of secular ideas. Perhaps by doing this, these feminists hope to convince the government that women's rights should be respected simply because women are human beings, not just because the Qur'an says that mothers deserve respect or that Muslim women should be protected. After all, what if women can never obtain rights beyond what is supported by the Qur'an? What if the state only defends the rights of Muslim

women and ignores religious minorities? All women deserve full rights, so why not set the bar higher?

To achieve this equality, some feminists call for the use of secular institutions and the building up of a strong civil society. Many aspire to not only attain equality for women, but to secure equality for all people, regardless of social, gender, religious, or ethnic differences (Moghadam 2002, 1160). Some insist that by reaching beyond the limits of Islam, feminists can make progress toward a more inclusive form of equality. While secular feminists acknowledge the achievements of Islamic feminists, they maintain that real democratization will “come about outside of the religious framework” (1151).

But just how will this real democratization materialize? If one works outside the religious framework, how successful can demands made to a theocratic government ever be? After all, even if Islam is not the primary informant of the government’s decisions, it still gives the government legitimacy, and the government is more likely to consider a religiously valid argument. Furthermore, the ideas of secular feminists might be seen as a product of Western influence, which would hardly endear them to anti-Western factions within Iran’s government. This illustrates the difference between a resonant and radical frame, as introduced by Mona Tajali; according to Tajali, scholars argue that an activist’s demands will resonate more successfully with elites if the activist takes into account cultural and political contexts (Tajali 2105, 569).

However, secular feminists have adopted a radical frame, not a resonant one. But how can they ever work with the government, let alone persuade it to make radical changes, if they ignore cultural and political contexts? The government cannot be bypassed, either; secular feminists cannot exactly stage a coup, take over the government, and establish a liberal

democracy. Iran's government is not going to transform into a Western-style government anytime soon; this kind of radical change seems very difficult to achieve and may not be feasible. Why not recognize the gradual nature of change and attempt to work within the stable system that is already in place?

This is exactly what the Islamic frame does. It does not require radical change, but rather adopts a resonant style that allows it to quietly work from within the regime. This sort of change might be slow and ultimately limited, but it is attainable and seems like a good first step in the advancement of women's rights. Additionally, it makes more sense to work towards change, albeit limited change, by bargaining with Iran's theocracy in the context of its own ideological language, rather than trying to invalidate its ideology and replace it with a new one for the sake of rapid and dramatic change, even if dramatic change is a long-term goal.

Tajali identifies Islamic women's rights activists as strategic, noticing that "they articulate their demands according to the discursive opportunity structure that best suits their contexts and furthers their aims" (Tajali 2015, 566). What she means is that, even if a frame does not perfectly align with their core values, Islamic activists will utilize it if it proves to be more effective in "garnering support and pressuring political elites" (567). This shows that such activists are pragmatic, clever, manipulative, and willing to compromise for the sake of progress. Their main goal is not to do it their way, but rather to identify and adopt the most effective discursive frame.

This manipulative aspect of Islamic feminism is also reflected in the fact that Islamic framing reinforces the government's legitimacy. Although this reinforcement is exactly what secular feminists dreaded, I believe that the reinforcement of the government's legitimacy allows Islamic feminists an opportunity to manipulate the government in a way that secular feminists

cannot, namely by tapping into the vulnerable masculinity complexes of government leaders and their corresponding desires to obtain and consolidate power.

The idea of power can be reduced to a few simple assumptions: People who are in power want to stay in power, people who are not in power want to gain power, and the people in the former group feel threatened by the ambitious members of the latter group. When it comes to the power of the men in the Iranian government, their power is two-fold: They have power over the state and they have power over women. The natural desire to consolidate power informs the men to be wary of potential challengers; their vulnerable masculinity informs them that that it would be even more disgraceful for their power to be taken away from them by a woman. This is why the men use their power to ensure that women do not become potential rivals. As men, they must dominate above women, and as members of the elite, they must dominate above potential challengers. To mollify activists and perhaps make themselves look better to international partners, these men make small concessions to women but will never willingly allow women to reach a status that threatens their power.

For example, in 2009, the Guardian Council, the all-male, 12-member powerhouse of the Iranian government—a masculine, powerful elite if there ever was one—declared that women could run in the upcoming elections. However, the Guardian Council also has the responsibility to vet potential presidential candidates, and it did not let allow of the 42 women applicants to progress to the candidacy stage (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013, 53). Even though the President holds far less power than the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, and even though the women would have had to win an election before reaching the presidency, the Council held tight to its power, informed by its elitism and masculinity.

This example is consistent with Tajali's observation that, even though women are highly active in politics on behalf of Islamic political movements, they have low levels of political representation. Despite their hard work on the campaigns of Islamic political parties, women are given no power once the successful campaign has concluded. Tajali states that "once in power, the male elites of such parties have often denied women any real power or influence in formal politics" (Tajali 2015, 564). This situation is a mirror image of the events of the 2009 presidential election, in which threat-sensitive male elites refused politically active women power.

This is where the Islamic feminist strategy comes in. Instead of making sweeping demands that threaten the masculine power structure, Islamic feminists recognize the value of making small demands that are supported by the Qur'an. So long as these demands do not threaten the power of the male elites, the government is more likely to accept them. Additionally, the government no doubt feels more secure agreeing to demands that are supported by Islam. In the government's eyes, it is acquiescing to demands that align with its own code of law, a code of law that not only informs but justifies its decisions and legitimizes its power!

Any group of people in power will chafe against demands that could diminish their authority, and a group of men in power is particularly sensitive to such threats, as history indicates. Such a group of men is very unlikely to pass any kind of significant legislation that threatens its power, even if the policy is economically beneficial and especially if the challengers are women. Powerful male elites will naturally gravitate towards demands that are framed in their own ideology, appear to respect their power, and even help legitimize it.

Islamic feminism can take advantage of this weakness. By working slowly and patiently, feminists can unravel some of the discriminations against women. These discriminations will be

reversed even more readily if the government sees economic benefit in doing so, which indicates the importance of the combination of a religious and secular frame. The notion of masculinity and the consolidation of power cannot be ignored, as it is a powerful force and weakness. Why challenge the government's power and get nowhere when one can work quietly, accumulating small concessions that eventually lead to increased power without the government even noticing? The possibility brings to mind the parable of the frog in water; the temperature of the water increases so gradually that the frog does not realize it is being boiled to death.

Secular feminists would probably dismiss this logic. After all, what would happen when the government begins to notice that women have more power? It might stop passing laws beneficial to women, or it might even take away women's rights and protections. Additionally, why should women be content with minor, occasional improvements of their rights? Why should they have to work with the government? Outright protest is often necessary, and women deserve to be respected as humans. Tajali also notes that discrimination against women occurs more often in religiously motivated parties than in their secular counterparts (Tajali 2015, 564), so why not defeat the Islamic parties and help secular parties gain political control? Then the government would be more responsive to the advancement of women's rights. However, even if a secularly-oriented government was automatically equivalent to a government attentive to women's rights, such a political shift is idealistic and unlikely to happen in theocratic Iran. The concerns of secular feminists are valid and important, but some of their solutions require dramatic change that is often not feasible.

For their part, secular feminists have their own criticisms of the religious approach. Some secular feminists believe that attempts at reinterpretation are futile; they believe that the power of orthodox and fundamentalist ideology, laws, and institutions is too strong for women to

overcome with liberal religious interpretations (Moghadam 2002, 1150). But this cannot be entirely true, for the government has shown its ability to make concessions. Whether these concessions were brought about by economic incentives or Islamic feminist demands is immaterial; the important takeaway is that there is room for bargaining, if not dramatic change.

Women have been bargaining successfully within patriarchal structures for centuries. Such bargaining has rarely allowed them to obtain substantial power, but it has allowed them to reach positions of relative power, even if, as Maryam Poya suggests, Islamic ideology has reduced women's bargaining positions (Poya 1999, 17). But should women be content with bargaining and relative power? They deserve opportunities, respect, jobs, and leadership roles. On the other hand, can these goals be achieved if one bypasses patriarchal bargaining, or is bargaining and the gradual accumulation of relative power a necessary stepping stone to full equality?

There are no conclusive answers to these questions. Feminists in Iran and elsewhere grapple constantly with the benefits and drawbacks of secular or religious approaches, and they remain divided over which frame is more effective. Despite all of their differences, however, these women have something in common: They are all active resisters of discrimination. Instead of quietly accepting their fate after the revolution, women protested and became activists. In the end, these women have the same fundamental goal, even if they disagree on how to reach it. Regardless of whether a woman prefers the secular or religious frame, whether or not she is a Muslim, or whether she wants to enter the public sphere or stay home and raise a family, all of these feminists want to protect and expand the rights of women.

There is an old and hostile division between secular and Islamic feminists, but some women have realized the importance of coming together. Rather than arguing about which frame

is better, women should focus on taking advantage of the benefits of both frames. What if women presented the government with a proposal that was not only supported by the Qur'an but also referenced international agreements and economic incentives? What if women put pressure on the government in multiple areas at once, fighting cleverly and relentlessly for their rights? If secular and Islamic feminists considered each other's critiques and modified and combined their strategies, they could form one powerful resistance.

The years directly following the Iranian Revolution were oppressive to women, but women, both secular and religious, resisted. Eventually, they did reverse many discriminatory policies, sometimes because the government bowed to their resistance, sometimes because of leadership changes, and sometimes because economic incentives happened to align with women's demands. Women continue to resist today by criticizing the low number of women in decision-making positions, opposing sexism and discriminatory bills, and working to mobilize civil society (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013, 53). The momentum of this resistance seems unstoppable, and it could become even more powerful if secular and religious feminists combined their efforts. Whether women call for the reversal of discriminatory bills, advocate for better representation, or urge the government to remove sexist barriers, the women's rights movement will be more powerful if feminists work together. As the oppressed minority fighting against a powerful male elite, secular and religious feminists must unite; when this is accomplished, Iranian women will have built a very formidable resistance indeed.

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