

Iranian Women's Movements in the Aftermath of the 1979 Revolution

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The rights and status of women in Iran since the popular revolution of 1979 and the inception of the Islamic Republic has been the subject of intense debate and scrutiny. Competing narratives and theoretical perspectives paint varying images of the nature of agency, resistance or subversion among Iranian women as they have contended with Islamist rule. However, missing in these studies has been an examination of women's own responses and activism in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. It is on this understudied wave of the Iranian women's movement that my dissertation research focuses.

In March 1979, only weeks after the toppling of the Pahlavi monarchy, post-revolutionary Iran was witness to a historic and massive mobilization of women on the streets. Responding to new statements made by the new leader Ayatollah Khomeini about mandatory veiling and occupational segregation, thousands of women poured onto the streets in protest. These unprecedented actions would be followed by the formation and activism of a number of women's organizations responding to the onslaught of gender discriminatory laws and practices. The latter included women's groups tied to prominent revolutionary Left organizations, as well as others that functioned independently of any existing political organizations. Autonomous women's associations were also formed within specific professions and workplaces. These movements for the most part dissipated within 2-3 years following the revolution as the state intensified its violent suppression of oppositional forces.



Though short-lived, this upsurge in feminist activity constituted a sharp turn from the gender politics of the revolutionary period. Despite women's widespread participation in

the revolution, concerns with gender equality were mostly overshadowed and subsumed by other political and economic grievances articulated against the Pahlavi regime. Women's right activism in the immediate post-revolutionary context then represents an important and momentous attempt by women to register their discontent with the discourses and outcomes of a revolution that had depended on their large-scale participation.

Yet, this wave of the women's movement has hitherto been largely neglected as a subject of documentation and analysis within Iranian historiography. While images from women's protests during this period have gained nearly iconic status, circulating widely among oppositional forces as displays of women's resistance and resilience in the face of theocratic rule, we know very little about this movement, its participants, or the challenges and tensions they faced. In the absence of this historical inquiry and understanding, images from this movement have come to serve as empty signifiers, mobilized in accordance with varying political interests and agendas.



To address this gap, my dissertation seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive historical documentation of this period of women's activism, as well as to offer a study of its origins, composition, demands, and the multifaceted factors that ultimately resulted in its demise. This study also necessitates a critical analysis of the prevalent nationalist discourses of the period on women's liberation, anti-imperialism, and class struggle. In the process, I aim to also unravel broader tensions between gender, national identity and modernity in contemporary Iran.

In carrying out this project, my dissertation relies as its empirical bedrock on extensive archival research as well as in-depth interviews with women's rights activists from the

period. Having already completed the archival research, I relied on the SRA grant to travel to Europe to fulfill the bulk of the interview component of my project. I conducted a total of 18 interviews over a 5-week period, with an attempt to capture the voices of women from a diverse array of backgrounds and experiences. The interviews were conducted in the cities of Paris, London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Amsterdam – cities where a considerable number of these former activists, the overwhelming majority of whom were compelled to leave Iran following the 1979 revolution to become members of the political exile community, now reside.

In identifying and locating interviewees, I relied on the ‘snowball’ method, networking extensively to find access to as diverse a pool of participants as possible. All the women I interviewed were either involved in the historic March 1979 streets protests and/or constituted members of women’s organizations that had sprung to action in the immediate post-revolutionary context. I conducted the interviews in an open-ended, free-ranging format, guided by a number of framing questions that invited participants to share not only details of their life and activism but also their own reflections and analysis.

The conversations revealed an incredible diversity among the women interviewed. While all had participated in the popular revolutionary movements of 1978-9 in some capacity, the nature of their participation was nevertheless differentiated by their varying political ideologies, affiliations, class positions, age, occupations, and social locations. Similarly noteworthy was the variety in the women’s personal and political experiences that culminated in their gender-conscious activism. Many of the women I interviewed had not considered gender equality as an important rallying cry in the leadup to and during the revolutionary period, motivated to participate in the revolution not *as women* but as socialists, communists, or anti-imperialists first and foremost. This reflected the prevailing political culture and discourses of the time, with anti-imperialism and class struggle prioritized among much of the revolutionary Left and other nationalist forces as the main basis for unity and struggle. These women offered a variety of reflections to explain the absence of overt concerns with gender equality on the Left, as well as describing the unique set of factors and developments that personally compelled each of them to develop an explicit political position on gender questions.

The interviews also shed light on the nature, composition and various demands of the March 1979 street mobilizations. They highlighted the sheer spontaneity that prompted and sustained the week-long protests, as well as the absence of a top-down organizational and decision-making model. Recalling the mood of the protests evoked memories of the overwhelming sense of possibility and solidarity that the collective actions had seemed to generate for many of the women interviewed, despite the violence and intimidation they were subjected to on the streets. In describing the composition of the protests, participants underscored the presence not only of activists and students but also of employed women (nurses, teachers, lawyers, government employees, university professors, etc.) who were alarmed about the potential impact of mandatory workplace veiling and segregation on their employment and economic well-being. Recollections from the protests also frequently cited the participation of veiled women who opposed its mandatory imposition.



While the core concern that brought this diverse group of women together was pushing back against mandatory veiling, for many the struggle spanned far beyond. This was a movement for not only protecting the rights and freedoms of women but also safeguarding the outcomes and direction of the popular revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy. For these women, the imposition of mandatory veiling only weeks after the revolution served as an indication of further rights violations to come in the post-revolutionary context, and their participation in the March 1979 protests represented an attempt to preserve the democratic spirit of the revolutionary movement. It is for this reason that many of the women described the absence of a sense of triumph and jubilation when revolutionary leaders initially retreated on the veiling decree in response to

protests. Immediately following the March 1979 protests, it was declared that veiling would not be mandatory and that women's rights would be protected under the new Islamic Constitution, though these statements would be rendered void only a short two years later when mandatory veiling officially became law, alongside a list of other gender-discriminatory practices.

Yet, women did not remain silent in the face of these changes. Beyond protests, women also organized themselves within autonomous associations, as well as semi-autonomous groups affiliated with established political organizations. As the interviews revealed, there was a great deal of variety among these diverse organizations in their understandings of women's liberation. These groups often also found themselves confronted with the challenge of navigating the dominant politics on the Iranian Left, from which a considerable majority of women's rights activists originated. Despite attracting a substantial following among women over the course of the revolution, Left political organizations had at best remained silent on gender questions and, at worst, associated the fight for women's rights with liberal and bourgeois ideas. Attributing Iran's social, economic and political ills to the dominance of foreign powers that strengthened the Shah's dictatorship, the Left – following the lead of Islamist forces – largely conceptualized liberation as a united national struggle against western imperialism and viewed the struggle for women's rights as a peripheral cause.

Within this context, for many women, their activism brought to the fore the contradictions and limitations of a revolutionary politics that failed to conceptualize women's liberation as a primary site of struggle. As I continue the process of coding and analyzing my research findings, I hope to further delve into the tensions and complexities women's activists faced in the period under study. In my dissertation, I seek to also build

on this case study to make theoretical contributions to feminist debates on the politics of universality and authenticity.