

## Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate

**F**ew debates among expatriate Iranian feminists and leftists have been as contentious as those centered on *Islamic feminism*. The very term as well as its referent are subjects of controversy and disagreement. Can there be such a thing as a feminism that is framed in Islamic terms? Is Islam compatible with feminism? Is it correct to describe as feminist or even as *Islamic feminist* those activists and scholars, including veiled women, who carry out their work toward women's advancement and gender equality within an Islamic discursive framework? Can the activities of reformist men and women—who situate themselves within the broad objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran and seek the improvement of the status of women—be described as constituting an Islamic feminism? Or are they reinforcing and legitimizing the state's gender policy? And are those expatriate feminist scholars who report positively on *Islamic feminism* correct to promote the phenomenon?<sup>1</sup> These are among the

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<sup>1</sup> "Islamic feminists" are publishers, writers, academics, lawyers, and politicians, many of whom are associated with the women's press in Iran. Most are part of the reform movement, which since 1997 has been led by President Mohammad Khatami, but their activities predate his election. They include Shahla Sherkat, editor of *Zanan* (Women); Azam Taleghani, a member of the Islamic Republic's first parliament and editor of *Payam-e Hajjar* (Hagar's message) who tried to run for president in 1997 but was barred because of her sex; Faezeh Hashemi, a daughter of former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani who owned the newspaper *Zan* (Woman), which was shut down by the authorities in the spring of 1999 because of the publication of a controversial cartoon and letter; Zahra Rahnavard, prerevolutionary journalist, wife of former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and professor at Al-Zahra University, who has criticized discrimination against women in the pages of the establishment magazine *Zan-e Rouz* (Today's woman); Maryam Behrouzi, former member of parliament and responsible for some successful prowomen legislation during the presidency of Hashemi-Rafsanjani; Jamileh Kadivar, university professor, head of the Association of Women Jour-

vexed questions that have emerged in various writings and that have been met by divergent responses.

This article provides an introduction to the debate and to its main protagonists. I focus on the Iranian debate, although there has been a wider and long-standing debate among feminists within Middle East women's studies regarding veiling and Islamic identity, feminisms among Arab/Muslim women, orientalism, universalist values, and cultural relativism.<sup>2</sup> Given the contentious nature of the debate and the tendency toward misrepresentation of positions, a concern for balance and clarity motivates this article. It is an attempt to contribute to dialogue and understanding and to help move the Iranian debate forward by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the two main positions and the gaps that need to be addressed. I am also concerned with the definition and meaning of feminism, its applicability to Muslim societies, and the need for a more inclusive and cross-cultural understanding of feminism and the global women's movement.

I begin by providing some background to the debate through an overview of the Iranian Revolution, the role of leftists in it, the gender regime instituted following the revolution, some comments on the expatriate community, and recent political developments in Iran. I then turn to the perspectives of the scholars involved in the debate. Finally, I discuss the

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nalists, elected member of a city council (in 1999) and of the Sixth Parliament (in the spring of 2000), sister of a prominent reform theologian and wife of a reformist cabinet minister; and scholars of Islam such as Monireh Gorji. Also included are Massoumeh Ebtekar and Mahboubeh Ommi (also known as Abbas-Gholizadeh), the editors of the women's studies quarterly, *Farzaneh* (Sage), notwithstanding their critiques of Western feminism and defense of Iran's clerical governance. (See, e.g., Ebtekar 1995–96 on the Fourth World Conference on Women and the editors' defense of "religious discourse, that of Islam in particular" in the preface to the same issue.) The term has sometimes been used to include secularists who work closely with the Islamic feminists and publish in their magazines, notably the feminist lawyers Shirin Ebadi and Mehrangiz Kar and the publisher and critic Shahla Lahiji, who owns Roshangaran Press. Other secular or independent feminists may be found among the editors and writers of the newer journals, *Hoghough-e Zanan* (Women's rights), *Negah-e Zanan* (Women's perspective), and *Jens-e Dovvom* (Second sex).

<sup>2</sup> For a sympathetic view of Islamic feminism as the wave of the future, see Badran 1999. Cooke 2001 describes how Arab/Muslim women, both secular and religious, are creating Islamic feminism through literature. For sympathetic approaches to veiling, see Hoodfar 1993; and Karam 1996, 1997. A critical approach is provided by Shahidian 1997, among others. For contrasting views on the analysis of the status of women in the Arab world, see Ghoussoub 1987, 1988; and Hammami and Rieker 1988. For critiques of orientalism and cultural relativism and a defense of universalist values, see Moghadam 1989a, 1993c, 1994b; Afkhami 1995; and Mayer 1995.

issues that are taken up by Islamic feminists and stake out my own perspective on the debate and on Islamic feminism itself.

### **The revolution and its aftermath: An overview**

In 1979, Iran's monarchy was replaced by an Islamic republic, whose ruling clerics immediately instituted radical political and social changes. A broad revolutionary coalition that included an array of political groups (leftists, nationalists, and Islamists) and social forces (women and men of the middle classes, the intelligentsia, the working class, and the urban poor) brought about this change in regime. As early as the spring of 1979, however, the revolutionary coalition began to break down over the political direction of the new republic, and a mini-civil war took place that only ended in 1981 (or, in some accounts, 1983). Thus, it may be said that Iran had two revolutions. The first, the populist revolution in which leftists were quite prominent, ended the monarchy and brought about a republic. The second, the Islamic revolution, marginalized or eradicated leftists and liberals and instituted a draconian cultural-political system characterized by the rule of a clerical caste, the application of Islamic law to the areas of personal status and crime, and compulsory veiling for women (Moghadam 1989b, 1994a). During the 1980s, leftists—whether of the communist or Muslim variety—were purged from jobs, forced underground, compelled to flee Iran to escape arrest, imprisoned, subjected to torture, executed, and assassinated. In Europe and the United States, as well as in the former socialist bloc countries, a large expatriate community of Iranian communists, monarchists, liberals, Muslim socialists, and feminists began to form.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) instituted other measures that greatly diminished the legal status and social positions of women. It banned women from serving as judges, discouraged women lawyers from practicing and other women from becoming lawyers, and excluded women from many fields of study, occupations, and professions. It repealed leg-

<sup>3</sup> The communists were associated with organizations such as the Tudeh Party, Fedayee, Paykar, and Rah-e Kargar. Of these, many continue to call themselves leftists or social democrats. The monarchists, whose U.S. stronghold is in Los Angeles, call for the resumption of the monarchy under the late Shah's eldest son. The liberals were those associated with the main nationalist party, the National Front, which had been part of the first revolutionary government but which was quickly sidelined by Ayatollah Khomeini and his associates. The Muslim socialists are members or supporters of the Iranian Mojahedin. After the revolution, the communists and the Mojahedin were the main targets of the Khomeini regime's repression. For an elaboration, see Moghadam 1987.

isolation, known as the Family Protection Act of 1967 and 1973, which had restricted polygyny, raised the age of marriage for girls, and allowed women the right to divorce. The Islamic regime all but banned contraception and family planning. It waged a massive ideological campaign that celebrated Islamic values and denigrated the West, extolled women's family roles, and championed *hejab* (Islamic modest dress) as central to the rejuvenation of Islamic society.<sup>4</sup>

The full effects of the Islamic Republic's definition of women's place came to light when the results of the 1986 national census of population and housing were analyzed. These included increasing fertility and population growth, a decline in female labor force participation, particularly in the industrial sector, lack of progress in literacy and educational attainment, and a sex ratio that favored males. Clearly, religio-politics had resulted in an extremely disadvantaged position for women; it had reinforced male domination; it had compromised women's autonomy; and it had created a set of gender relations characterized by profound inequality.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1990s, however, the combination of a number of factors served to undermine several of the most egregious policies of the Islamic Republic and reverse its program on women, family, and gender relations. The changes occurred after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and in the context of a program for economic liberalization, integration into the global economy, and the (re)establishment of capitalist society.

The first set of factors that shaped the trajectory of the Islamic Republic and its gender regime pertain to the social structure and the nature of Iran's Islamic ideology. In the 1980s Iran had a sizable modern middle class and working class whose members had relatively high rates of literacy and educational attainment. Iran has had a relatively long experience with modernization and economic development, and women's roles were somewhat varied in prerevolutionary Iran. Iranian modernization certainly affected expectations and aspirations within Iranian society, resulting in considerable resistance to strict Islamization.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, it may also have shaped the values and vision of many Islamists. Two important ideologues of the Islamic Republic, the late Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and the late Ali Shariati, were part of the school of Islamic modernism.

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration of these early events, see Tabari and Yeganeh 1982; and Neshat 1983.

<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration, see Moghadam 1993b, chap. 6.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of women's resistance narrated by women themselves, see Esfandiari 1997, esp. chap. 5.

Their thinking on women was contradictory and problematical, but they claimed to espouse women's rights; "both men found it necessary to show that Islam did not stand in the way of women's education, work, and participation in social life or stunt the personal development of women" (Esfandiari 1993, 16). Neither Motahhari nor Shariati opposed women's employment, although Motahhari, whose wife was a schoolteacher, did call for sex segregation in the workplace. Many of the officials of the Islamic Republic, including some of the clerical leaders, have higher education, are from the middle class, and favor industrialization, foreign investment, and economic growth.

The second set of factors was the long war with Iraq (1980–88) and the mobilization of all Iranian men. This created some employment opportunities for educated women in the public sector, particularly in health, education, and (to a lesser extent) public administration. These jobs went to ideologically correct women, but their very presence suggested both the determination of women and the flexibility of the Islamic regime. Third, while women were discouraged from assuming public roles, they were not formally banned from the public sphere; moreover, the regime rewarded Islamic women by allowing them to run for parliament and giving them jobs in the civil service. As early as the IRI's first parliament in 1980 there were four women members, at least two of whom—Azam Taleghani and Maryam Behrouzi—became known as Islamic feminists. Many of the women parliamentarians and women civil servants came to make demands on the government for equality and greater opportunity. Fourth, although working-class women were the most adversely affected by the early employment policies, a small contingent continued to work in factories, whether out of their own need and aspirations or because the employers could not find men to replace them. Women in such occupations served to negate the ideal of full-time motherhood and notions of the inappropriateness of factory work for women.

Fifth, evidence of increasing fertility in a situation of declining government revenues, indebtedness due to the war with Iraq, and increasing unemployment and poverty alarmed the authorities. Thus, following the death of Khomeini, the government reversed its opposition to family planning and embarked on a vigorous campaign to stabilize population growth through the widespread distribution of contraceptives to married women and men. In May 1994 the streets of Tehran were filled with signs promoting the campaign, linking small families to a higher quality of life and healthier children.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Personal observation. For an elaboration, see Moghadam 1998, chap. 7.

Sixth, as a result of agitation by activist Islamic women, restrictive barriers to women's educational achievement and their employment were removed. In 1992 the High Council of the Cultural Revolution adopted a set of employment policies for women. This new directive, while reiterating the importance of family roles and continuing to rule out certain occupations and professions as Islamically inappropriate, encouraged the integration of women in the labor force and directed attention to their interests and needs. The government also changed its policy on women and the legal profession, and during the 1990s the field of law became more open to women. In April 1993 there were 2,661 registered lawyers in Iran, including 185 women.<sup>8</sup> The law of 1371/1992 allowed for the employment of "women legal consultants" in the special civil courts. In 1997 the judiciary began to employ some twenty women holding degrees in law who would work as investigation judges, court counselors, and deputies/assistant judges.<sup>9</sup> Since the 1990s there has been a steady increase in women's share of government employment, though this may reflect the deterioration of government wages and the increasing participation of men in the private sector. The number of public-sector employees was nearly two million in 1994, of which 603,000, or about 31 percent, were women. The ministries of education and health employed most of these women (43.8 percent and 40 percent, respectively), and nearly 34 percent of them had university degrees.<sup>10</sup> By 1996, fully 38 percent of civil servant employees were female.

As a result of both its own economic imperatives and the repeated requests of women advocates, the government undertook a number of measures pertaining to women and work, including vocational training for rural women. A bill was passed in 1992 to guarantee equal payment of new year bonuses for male and female civil servants. Rafsanjani's government encouraged the participation of women in scientific and technical fields such as medicine, pharmacology, midwifery, and laboratory work—"which is more suitable to their physiological make-up" (Islamic Republic of Iran 1992)—and established quotas of 25 percent female in the fields of neurology, brain surgery, cardiology, and similar specializations.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, women's access to secondary schooling and higher education increased steadily over the decade.

In the realm of politics, the increasing visibility of women has been a

<sup>8</sup> See Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1993, 44.

<sup>9</sup> See Islamic Republic of Iran 1994, 15; and Moghadam 1998, 163.

<sup>10</sup> See Bureau of Women's Affairs 1995, 45–46.

<sup>11</sup> See Moghadam 1998, 164.

gradual but noticeable trend. During the 1995 parliamentary elections, nine female members of parliament were elected to the Majlis; women's affairs offices were established in each ministry and government agency; and numerous nongovernmental (or rather quasi-governmental) organizations dealing with women's concerns were formed. Speeches by the women parliamentarians attest to changing and more assertive attitudes, with language that is less specifically Islamic and more compatible with what may be called "global feminism." Maryam Behrouzi, for example, stated, "We don't believe that every social change is harmful. Cultural refinement of some traditions, such as patriarchy (*mardsalari*), anti-woman attitudes (*zan-setizi*), and humiliation of women (*tahghir-e zanan*) must disappear. These have been fed to our people in the name of Islam" (quoted in *Zan-e Rouz* 1994, 4).

In the latter part of the 1990s, a new trend emerged in Iran: a broad-based social movement for the reform of the Islamic Republic. This movement—comprised largely of students, intellectuals, and women—has called for civil liberties, political freedoms, women's rights, and a relaxation of cultural and social controls. The reform movement has been behind the proliferation of a dynamic (albeit beleaguered) press, the 1997 election of the liberal cleric Mohammad Khatami, and the outcome of the parliamentary elections of February 2000, in which reformists made sweeping gains. Intellectuals have issued open letters and penned articles deemed seditious, and several prominent writers and dissidents have been jailed or murdered. In an audacious move in July 1999, university students protested against state repression and called for an acceleration of President Khatami's calls for civil society and democracy in Iran, only to be met by violent assaults by Islamist vigilantes.<sup>12</sup> Most of the Islamic feminists discussed in this article are associated with the reform movement, although they have not engaged in similar forms of collective action.

The Islamic Republic's gender regime has certainly evolved since the 1980s. In 1997, the newly elected President Khatami named Massoumeh Ebtekar, a U.S.-educated lecturer and an editor of the women's studies journal *Farzaneh*, as vice president in charge of environmental affairs. Culture Minister Ayatollah Mohajerani then appointed Azam Nouri as deputy culture minister for legal and parliamentary affairs. Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri followed by naming Zahra Shojai as Iran's first director-general for women's affairs, described in the Iranian media as a

<sup>12</sup> For an elaboration of the July 1999 protests by university students and of the reform movement in Iran, see the special issues of the *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* (Zanganeh 1999, 2000).

long-time women's rights activist, a professor at al-Zahra University in Tehran, and a member of the interior ministry's Women's Commission. Shojai would be responsible for issues such as social policies for women and violence against women. These were the first women to serve in top government posts since the 1979 revolution, and they proceeded to work with the reformist women parliamentarians who won seats in the February 2000 Majlis elections. It is the interpretation of these political developments, and the contributions of activist Islamic women to liberalization and reform, that is at the heart of the debate on Islamic feminism.

#### **The debate: Viewpoints of the protagonists**

Those involved in the debate on Islamic feminism form two opposing camps. On the one side are those who explore the possibilities that exist within Islam and within the IRI concerning women's interests. Chief among them are three feminist social scientists educated in Iran and the West, two of whom have deep roots in the Iranian left and the women's movement. Afsaneh Najmabadi, educated in both the United Kingdom and the United States, is a professor of women's studies in New York; Nayereh Tohidi is a U.S.-trained professor of women's studies in California; Ziba Mir-Hosseini is a Cambridge-educated social anthropologist based in London. In the 1970s and 1980s Tohidi and Najmabadi were active in the left-wing anti-Shah student movement and later in the antifundamentalist and feminist movements. Najmabadi was a founding editor of the expatriate feminist journal *Nimeh-ye Digar* (The other half). Tohidi, who traveled to Iran several times in the 1990s, is in close contact with feminists in Iran and, like Najmabadi, often publishes in the Iranian women's press. Mir-Hosseini, along with British filmmaker Kim Longinotto, produced the acclaimed 1998 documentary film *Divorce Iranian Style* and most recently has filmed a documentary on runaway girls in Iran.

In the opposite camp are those who argue vehemently against the possibility that activists and scholars operating within an Islamic framework, especially in contemporary Iran, may be accurately described as "Islamic feminists." Islamic feminists and their expatriate academic supporters, they argue, either consciously or unwittingly delegitimize secular trends and social forces. They maintain that the activities and goals of "Islamic feminism" are circumscribed and compromised, and they contend that there cannot be improvements in women's status as long as the Islamic Republic is in place. This group similarly includes Western-educated feminist social scientists, one of whom is a man, with deep roots in

the left and in the women's movement. Haideh Moghissi teaches women's studies in Canada, Shahrzad Mojab holds a university administrative post in Canada, and Hammed Shahidian teaches sociology in the United States. Shahidian's articles have appeared in U.S. sociology journals and in the women's press in Iran. All three situate themselves on the secular left of the Iranian political spectrum.

### ***In defense of Islamic feminism***

Although writings on women and gender in the Islamic Republic were almost uniformly critical during the 1980s, a change of tone and style could be discerned after 1990.<sup>13</sup> Several studies began to argue that reforms and policy shifts were occurring in the Islamic Republic, that an incipient women's movement was under way, and that Muslim women activists were behind many of the changes. In the early 1980s, the writings of Parvin Paidar (sometimes under the name Nahid Yeganeh) suggested that Islamic women and left-wing women had some of the same concerns regarding the legal status and social positions of women and that these could lead to future alliances. "On the political front," she wrote, "we must situate ourselves in the mainstream of debates and dialogues. In making our alliances and voicing our oppositions, we cannot rely on preconceived ideas about ideologies such as Islam. Islamic political forces should always be assessed in relation to the overall political scene" (Yeganeh 1982, 70). At the time, however, her writings did not engender the kind of harsh debate that has developed since the mid-1990s. The debate proper on Islamic feminism may be said to have begun in February 1994, when Najmabadi gave a talk at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in which she described Islamic feminism as a reform movement that opens up a dialogue between religious and secular feminists. A Persian-language article ensued, and at least two English-language essays contain her views (Najmabadi 1995, 1997, 1998).

In her talk, Najmabadi focused on the women's magazine *Zanan* and the quarterly *Farzaneh*, both published in Tehran. *Zanan*, which was founded in 1992 by Shahla Sherkat, the former editor of the establishment women's magazine *Zan-e Rouz*, had become by 1994 the major voice for reform in the status of women. In the magazine's inaugural issue, Sherkat writes, "We believe that the key to the solution of women's problems lies

<sup>13</sup> Representative of critical studies were Afshar 1985; Moghadam 1991; Tohidi 1991; Najmabadi 1994. For the tone and style of the 1990s, which emphasized resistance and empowerment, see Moghadam 1993b; Ramazani 1993; Afshar 1996; Tohidi 1997a, 1997b; Najmabadi 1998; Poya 1999.

in four realms: religion, culture, law, and education. If the way is paved in these four principal domains then we can be hopeful of women's development and society's advancement" (*Zanan* 1992, 2). Each issue of the magazine has sections and articles on these four areas. *Farzaneh* is an academic journal of women's studies and research and less radical in its approach and its implications than *Zanan*. Najmabadi argued that Islamic feminists—and especially the editor and writers of *Zanan*—are open to Western feminism. Their translation and publication of the writings of Western feminists proves this. She described how articles in *Zanan*—particularly a series of articles that appeared in the initial issues—challenge orthodox Islamic teachings on the differential rights and responsibilities of women and men by claiming women's right to equality. She explained that part of her enthusiasm for Islamic feminism, and especially for *Zanan*, lay in her belief that they have entered a common ground with secular feminists in their attempts to improve women's legal status and social positions.

In her writings, Najmabadi discusses how Islamic feminists have come to insist that gender discrimination has a social rather than a natural (or divine) basis and how this could open the door to new possibilities for gender equality. Moreover, Sherkat and similar women, well versed in the Qur'an and who refer directly to the Qur'an in their writings, have raised the issue of the right to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning, religious interpretation) and the right of women to reinterpret Islamic law. Najmabadi writes, "At the center of *Zanan's* revisionist approach is a radical decentering of the clergy from the domain of interpretation, and the placing of woman as interpreter and her needs as grounds for interpretation" (1998, 71). This, she feels, challenges one of the foundational concepts of the Islamic Republic: deference to the rulership of the supreme jurist, or the *velayat-e faghib* (71). Another reason for Najmabadi's celebration of Islamic feminism (again, as articulated in *Zanan*) is her belief that it has opened up a new space for dialogue between Islamic women activists and reformers and secular feminists, thereby breaking down the old hostile divide between secular and religious thought. She maintains that *Zanan* could bridge the divide between Muslim women and women of the religious minorities—though she does not elaborate on this point or provide any empirical examples (77).

Najmabadi further elaborates her hopeful prognosis regarding Islamic feminism in two essays in which she explains the views of the cofounders of the women's studies journal *Farzaneh*. Her interpretation of several essays by Ebtekar and Mahboubeh Ommi suggests that the two are open

to an emancipatory program for women, and one that is not necessarily exclusively grounded in Islam (Najmabadi 1997, 392, 1998, 81).

Like Najmabadi, Mir-Hosseini offers a careful analysis of the writings of *Zanan*, and she was the first to point out that the author of the early revisionist Islamic writings was a cleric, Mohsen Saidzadeh, who was writing under a female pseudonym.<sup>14</sup> But her analysis of gender and Islamic feminism in Iran goes even further, and she may be said to hold the “strong thesis” on Islamic feminism. In her writings, she focuses on new discourses on gender among Islamic theologians, the challenging of Islamic family laws by ordinary women, and the emergence of reform-minded Islamic feminists. Mir-Hosseini argues that an unpredicted outcome of the Islamic revolution in Iran has been to raise the nation’s gender consciousness. “Whatever concerns women—from their most private to their most public activities, from what they should wear and what they should study to whether and where they should work—are issues that have been openly debated and fought over by different factions, always in highly charged and emotional language” (1996b, 143). She is mainly concerned with the paradoxical ways that the whole process has come to empower women and to create a popular feminist consciousness.

Mir-Hosseini has written most extensively about how family law, and in particular marriage and divorce, have constituted a contested arena. The official discourse promotes domesticity and motherhood for women as ideal roles, and the constitution promises to guard the sanctity of the family. Yet, the return to Sharia law gives men a free hand in divorce and polygamy. This “in effect subverts the very sanctity of the family as understood by women, thus going against the Constitution’s promise” (Mir-Hosseini 1996b, 149). She then argues that many Muslim women who had at the beginning genuinely, albeit naively, believed that under an Islamic state women’s position would automatically improve became increasingly disillusioned by the new discriminatory and patriarchal discourses and policies. These included establishment women such as Zahra Rahnavard, Azam Taleghani, and Monireh Gorji. Meanwhile, under the editorship of Sherkat, *Zanan* became the principal forum for the discussion of the injustices of current Sharia interpretations and their application to civil codes. In *Zanan* and elsewhere, feminist lawyers Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi delineate the problems and legal tangles that women confront in terms of both the substance of the law and its implementation.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Mir-Hosseini 1999 elaborates on Sa’idzadeh’s views (and those of other reformist as well as conservative clerics).

<sup>15</sup> Kar and especially Ebadi have written extensively on legal matters in the liberal monthly magazine *Jameh-e Saalem*, and they have lectured in the United States and Europe.

The Islamic Republic's failure to deliver on its promise to honor and protect women, Mir-Hosseini argues, has led to the emergence of the Islamic feminist challenge, or as she puts it, "[to] an indigenous, locally produced, feminist consciousness" (1996b, 162). This consciousness and challenge, she suggests, led to amendments to the divorce law in 1992, whose spirit is to make divorce less accessible and more costly to men. It has led to the widespread use of concepts such as *mardsalari*, which refers to male dominance and patriarchy. And it has led to the proliferation of social analyses by and about women and gender, particularly in *Zanan*. Mir-Hosseini has traced the evolution of these analyses in *Zanan* from the hesitant voice of the magazine's beginning, to the assertion of a *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) voice, particularly with the series of articles written by the cleric Mohsen Saidzadeh in favor of equality for women and men and the reform of Sharia laws (1996a, 1998, 1999). She shows how the emerging Islamic feminist perspective rejects the orthodox view of complementarity of rights—a notion that emphasizes gender differences in rights and obligations and sees their source in both natural and divine law. And like Najmabadi, she sees *Zanan*'s willingness to publish the lawyer Kar as a sign of the magazine's "willingness to join forces with secular feminists to protest against the gender biases of a law which is derived from the Sharia." She deems this development "novel in post-revolutionary politics" (Mir-Hosseini 1996a, 318).

In *Islam and Gender*, Mir-Hosseini provides a detailed account of three Islamic perspectives on and debates about women and gender: traditionalist, neotraditionalist, and modernist. Drawing on her extensive fieldwork and taped interviews with leading clerics, she shows the similarities and differences among the three perspectives, the extent to which "the woman question" preoccupies them, and "the avenues they are opening for dialogue and change within the framework of Islam" (1998, 277). She concludes that the gender debates in Iran have "nurtured not only a new school of jurisprudence, which is slowly trying to respond to social realities, but also a new gender consciousness" (1998, 279).

Nayereh Tohidi is well known in Iranian expatriate circles for her many Persian-language writings and lectures on politics and women, from her early days as a left activist to the present. Her articles in the 1980s tended to be very critical of the Islamic Republic and of its gender policies. During the 1990s her writings shifted from an emphasis on the forms of gender oppression in Iran to the empowerment of Muslim women and the possibilities for reform within the Islamic system in Iran. Taking a cue from Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy," she argues that women are able to renegotiate gender roles and codes and to

find “a path of compromise and creative synthesis” (Tohidi 1997b, 106). She explains how her visits to Iran during the 1990s, and in particular her interviews and observations, compelled her to shift her focus from repression to resistance and empowerment. Moreover, she lists a number of scholars who, like herself, have changed their mode of inquiry, mainly on the basis of empirical research. Her views are expounded in a number of Persian-language journals and in a Persian-language book (1997a, 1997b), but Tohidi also publishes in English. She asserts that “secular feminists, democrats, and liberals have not been alone in contesting the state’s ideology and politics on gender issues. Many proponents of Islam are playing an important role in the reformation of women’s rights in an Islamic context” (1998, 285).

In a book that she has coedited, Tohidi writes approvingly that women in the Muslim world are fighting and strategizing against two sets of pressures, “one stemming from the internal patriarchal system and the other emitted by those forces seen as external, threatening people’s national and cultural boundaries.” She describes one of those strategies, “the recently growing phenomenon of ‘Islamic feminism,’” a movement of women who “have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female-supportive verses of the Qur’an in their fight for women’s rights, especially for women’s access to education.” Echoing Mir-Hosseini, she notes that Islamic feminists undermine the clerical agenda both within and outside the Islamist framework in a number of ways: “by subtly circumventing the dictated rules (e.g., reappropriating the veil as a means to facilitate social presence rather than seclusion, or minimizing and diversifying the compulsory hijab and dress code into fashionable styles), engaging in a feminist *ijtihad*, emphasizing the egalitarian ethics of Islam, reinterpreting the Qur’an, and deconstructing Sharia-related rules in a women-friendly egalitarian fashion (e.g., in terms of birth control, personal status law, and family code to the extent of legalizing a demand for ‘wages for housework’)” (1998, 283–85).

Tohidi warns that “secular feminists should differentiate between those Islamic women who are genuinely promoting women’s rights and hence inclusionary in their politics from those who insist on fanatic or totalitarian Islam” (287). She echoes the feminist lawyer Kar in stressing that a “reformist or women-centered interpretation of religious laws should be considered not as an alternative to secular and democratic demands but as a component of more holistic social change” (288). Elsewhere, she elaborates on the necessary interaction of religious reinterpretation and secular thought and activism toward modernity and democracy in Iran (1999).

### ***The case against Islamic feminism***

Haideh Moghissi complains that “it has become fashionable to speak sympathetically and enthusiastically about the reformist activities of Muslim women, and to insist on their independence of thought. . . . The message is that a new road has been opened up for women—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—to gain equal rights to men: a road based on feminist interpretations of Islamic sharia laws” (Moghissi 1998, 42). This is problematical, she writes, for several reasons. It obscures the fact that in a country like Iran, Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual choice but rather a legal and political system. “Islam in political rule is incompatible with the cultural pluralism that is after all the prerequisite of the right to individual choice” (43).

Although critical of those “apologists of the Islamic government and uninformed observers” who attribute legal changes in the Islamic Republic to “the enlightenment of conservative Islamists” (1995, 251), she does not directly claim that there have been no achievements by Islamic feminists in Iran. In fact, she refers to the opportunities afforded to Islamic women and to the accomplishments of the female political elite. Without properly attributing these ideas to previous authors, she notes that the Islamic Republic’s gender ideology faces the imperatives of a capitalist system, which requires sexual desegregation, and that the clerical state tries to accommodate the demands of activist women (1995, 252).<sup>16</sup> But then she opines that the “exaggerated reports” about recent legal gains by women, and the role of Islamic feminists in bringing them about, divert attention away from societal opposition to the economic, social, and cultural conditions brought about by nearly two decades of Islamization. It serves to strengthen the legitimacy of the Islamic system in Iran and “weakens the struggle of women inside Iran” (Moghissi 1998, 43). She does not explain how this occurs.

A central point is that the term *Islamic feminist* has been used in “inaccurate” and “irresponsible” ways. Almost all Islamic and active women are designated Islamic feminist, Moghissi asserts, “even though their activities might not even fit the broadest definition of feminism” (1998, 42). Although she herself does not define feminism, Moghissi complains that the term *Islamic feminism* encompasses members of the female political elite who believe in the Sharia and its prescribed gender

<sup>16</sup> The argument about capitalist contradictions facing the Islamic Republic is contained in Moghadam 1988, 1993b, chap. 6. The argument about accommodating the demands of activist women is made in Tohidi 1994 and in her other writings. I make the same point in the above works.

rights and roles, such as three former female parliamentarians who were responsible for two reactionary bills. Another criticism is that the term and the emphasis on the achievements of those believing women who reinterpret the Qur'an obscure the political, ideological, and religious differences among Iranian women and mask the valiant efforts of socialists, democrats, and feminists to work toward secularism (Moghissi 1997).<sup>17</sup> In her 1999 book, which is largely a collection of previously published essays, she writes of "the masterful manipulation of observers by the fundamentalists" (104). As in her Persian-language article, Moghissi singles out expatriate feminist authors, finds faults with their analyses, and labels them. But whereas in her *Kankash* article she deemed them "neoconservative," in her book she brands them "postmodernists" and "cultural relativists." She writes, "Charmed by 'difference' and secure from the bitter fact of the fundamentalist regime, outsiders do them [Iranian women and men] a disservice by clinging to the illusion of an Islamic path" (1999, 121).<sup>18</sup>

Hammed Shahidian similarly argues that the politics of "Islamic feminism" is problematical, whether in Iran or elsewhere. Like Moghissi, he argues that the emphasis on the achievements of Islamic women obscures the contributions of the left and secularists in the face of continued Islamist repression in Iran. (Ironically, Shahidian, like Moghissi, has published essays exceedingly critical of the left.)<sup>19</sup> In one article he refers to a "deepening identity crisis" among secular Middle East feminists and approvingly quotes two Iranian left-wing feminists: "Some women have found the pull towards a full or partial reconciliation with Iranian-style fundamentalism stronger. A trend is now developing among some Iranian feminists . . . to stand back and consider Islamic fundamentalism as opposed to stand up and fight against it." Shahidian adds that "this is a keen prognosis about the emerging conciliatory regard for 'Islamic feminism,'" and he implies that academic supporters of Islamic feminism have given up the

<sup>17</sup> I am among those criticized by Moghissi in that article (and elsewhere). The article does not define "neoconservative," does not distinguish between the active leftists and non-leftists among "Iranian Academic Feminists," and does not explain how secularists, democrats, and so on have been harmed by academic feminist support for Islamic feminism.

<sup>18</sup> In her book Moghissi shifts, without explanation, from the label "neoconservative" to the label "postmodern." Once again, she does not distinguish between those academic feminists who have been inspired by postmodernism (e.g., Najmabadi) and those who have not (Tohidi, Mir-Hosseini, and myself).

<sup>19</sup> See Shahidian 1994; and Moghissi 1993, 1996. For a more sympathetic treatment of the Iranian left, see Moghadam 1987; and Ashtiani and Moghadam 1991.

“critical edge” that he finds so appealing in his discipline, sociology (1999, 318).

Dismissive of attempts by Arab scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Aziza Al-Hibri and the Pakistan-born Riffat Hassan to craft a feminist theology and reinterpretation of Islamic texts, Shahidian argues that these attempts are futile, given the strength of conservative, orthodox, traditional, and fundamentalist interpretations, laws, and institutions. He is especially critical of a growing trend in Middle East women’s studies wherein authors justify Muslim women’s veiling, domesticity, moral behavior, and adherence to Islamic precepts as signs of individual choice and identity (Shahidian 1997).<sup>20</sup> Even if we do not accept the notion of “false consciousness,” he asks, is it not incumbent on scholars to situate and understand actors’ views and perceptions within the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context? Political repression, cultural conservatism, and the social control of women characterize this context, he notes. For these reasons, Shahidian not only argues that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron but also that it has wider ramifications even beyond the Iranian left and Iranian society. Although he does not elaborate on this point, he asserts that Islamic feminism and its defense “affects the women’s movement and the Left worldwide” (1998b).

Shahidian notes that Islamic feminists in Iran have been attentive to and influenced by Western feminism. But he is critical of them for neglecting key issues of sexuality, veiling, and religious law (1998b). His involvement in the debate on Islamic feminism extends to participation in an exchange with Iranian sociologist Nahid Motiee in the pages of *Zanan*. Shahidian criticizes Motiee’s defense of the family and raises questions about her and other Islamic feminists’ understanding of patriarchy, gender, and sexuality, including homosexuality (1998a).<sup>21</sup> He concludes that Islamic feminism fails to offer a liberating alternative to the dominant Islamic discourse and practice of gender and sexuality.

Whereas Shahidian has been especially critical of Tohidi, Shahrzad Mojab has focused on Najmabadi’s writings on Islamic feminism. In an article published in the Persian-language magazine *Arash*, Mojab criticizes Najmabadi for suggesting that *Zanan* is the new “democratic forum” and that it can help to feminize democracy. She disputes Najmabadi’s hopeful

<sup>20</sup> Shahidian’s article on the politics of the veil is in part a critique of an article by Azza Karam (Karam 1996) that sympathetically reports on Egyptian women’s veiling.

<sup>21</sup> In a personal communication (March 7, 2000, Cairo), Nahid Motiee, a sociologist who has researched the growth of female-headed households in Iran, told me that her strong defense of the family was influenced by what she perceived as Shahidian’s own extreme views.

prognosis about the reinterpretation of Islamic texts and stresses that the ruling religious elite can dismiss, delegitimize, or prohibit radical or feminist reinterpretations. What Iran's Islamic feminists have achieved is, at any rate, quite limited in content and consequence. Real change—real democratization—will come about outside of the religious framework, writes Mojab (1999).

Some Iranian leftists in exile have been very vocal in opposing Islamic feminism. Left-opposition newspapers and magazines have carried articles describing the phenomenon and rejecting it as illusory or as legitimizing Islamic rule. Representative of this line of thought is an editorial titled "The Limits of Islamic Feminism" in *Iran Bulletin* (Kia 1994), an English-language magazine published in England with ties to the socialist group Rah-e Kargar. The basic premise is that no reform is possible in an Islamic legal and political system where "the very structure of power is male dominated to an absolute degree, backed by the Constitution, an all male clerical system ruling the country, and a Shari'a written for an era long past its sell-by date." The author, M. Kia, argues that the Islamic reformist discourse is not identical to liberation theology but derives from "a religion in which the role of women is clearly stated." This stated role includes women's inferior status with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and court witnessing, the ban on women judges, and mandated veiling. The article notes that under pressure from women a debate has been under way and some political changes have been introduced, but the reforms have been limited and do nothing more than return Iranian gender codes to their prerevolutionary situation, which is still considerably behind most countries with similar economic status. Any reform movement or discourse that is carried out within the framework of Islamic law and that takes for granted the legitimacy and permanence of an Islamic state and of Qur'anic edicts is at best a very limited project and at worst a way of legitimizing the Islamic legal, political, and moral framework. With respect to Islamic feminism, "it would thus seem rather naïve to place too much hope in the 'internal' opposition to effect significant change in the conditions of women in Iran" (Kia 1994, 20–21).

Another argument, made mostly against the academic supporters of Islamic feminism, has surfaced in a number of Iranian seminars and conferences, mainly on the part of left-wing expatriates who remain affiliated with proscribed political organizations and therefore have not traveled back to Iran since the revolution. They complain that proponents of Islamic feminists—insisting as they do on the need for fieldwork, empirical research, and direct experience in Iran—delegitimize the analyses and perspectives of exiles. As such, they effectively close off debate and silence

the critics of social conditions, gender relations, and Islamic feminism in Iran.<sup>22</sup>

The criticism of Islamic feminism is not limited to left-wing circles. Mahnaz Afkhami is a liberal feminist based in the Washington, D.C., area. Well known for her activism and eloquence, she was president of the Iran Women's Organization before the revolution; during much of the 1990s she was executive director of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute, a transnational feminist network. Speaking for herself and several other Iranian feminists, she said, "Our difference with Islamic feminists is that we don't try to fit feminism in the Qur'an. We say that women have certain inalienable rights. The epistemology of Islam is contrary to women's rights. But you can use what you need to [to advance women's positions]. I call myself a Muslim and a feminist. I'm not an Islamic feminist—that's a contradiction in terms."<sup>23</sup>

#### **Islamic feminism: An assessment and alternative view**

The Iranian debate on Islamic feminism certainly reflects the fragmentation of the Iranian left in exile. But it is probably best understood as part of three broad and at times overlapping debates and political realities. The first pertains to Islamic fundamentalism, including its origins, gender dynamics, and contradictions; the second to the IRI, including its gender regime and political evolution; and the third to the definition of feminism and the nature of women's movements around the world. In the interstices lies an ongoing debate within the expatriate Iranian left concerning the extent of reform possible within the Islamic Republic.

#### ***Fundamentalism, the Islamic Republic, and feminism***

In the 1980s and 1990s, many of those who were grappling with the perplexing phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism were Middle Eastern academic women (like myself) who were writing in North America and Europe. Politics and disciplinary training alike informed our approaches. We approached the problem of Islamic fundamentalism from a political position (whether socialist, feminist, or liberal), but we also sought to distance ourselves from Eurocentric and orientalist approaches. It was very important to refute orientalist charges that Islamic fundamentalism was the inevitable political expression of the Muslim world and to counter

<sup>22</sup> This argument surfaced at the seventh annual conference of the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation, which took place in Seattle in June 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, interview by author, Washington, D.C., November 21, 1999.

cultural relativist arguments that criticism of gender practices in non-Western cultures was inappropriate and an imposition of Western values. At the same time, many of us who were social scientists used our disciplinary tools to analyze relations, institutions, and processes in Muslim societies (e.g., Kandiyoti 1990; Moghadam 1993a). Historical and comparative methods, for example, suggested similarities between Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East at the end of the twentieth century and American Protestant fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. Both movements occurred in the context of the contradictions of modernity and modernization, including growing secularization and changes to family structure. (A difference between the two, of course, is that Islamic fundamentalism occurred in the regional context of Middle East politics, including the intractability of the Palestinian-Israeli problem, and the international context of economic recession and growing inequalities.) Scholars were also interested in the differences among Islamist movements (e.g., Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Algeria) and in the evolution of political Islam. In the late 1990s, a consensus developed that the wave of movements for political Islam that had swept over the Middle East and North Africa was subsiding, although the legacy of Islamic fundamentalism remains to be fully understood.

A parallel and interrelated debate has centered on the evolution of the Islamic Republic in the 1990s. Has the regime shown a capacity for reform? Is the IRI moving in a capitalistic, bourgeois direction that may augur legal reforms and changes in social relations (including gender relations and laws about women and the family)? Or is the Islamic Republic mired in a crisis that only complete systemic transformation can resolve? Again, Iranians have approached these questions both politically (“subjectively”) and academically (“objectively”). Most of the expatriate oppositional press and some books highlight the political repression, violations of women’s human rights, the archaic political system of clerical governance, and economic inefficiencies to insist on the impossibility of fundamental reform and change (e.g., Behdad and Rahnema 1995; Abrahamian 1999).<sup>24</sup> Other publications have documented reforms in the political system, economic policy, and foreign policy and progress in the spheres of education and infrastructural development that have occurred since the late 1980s (e.g., Ehteshami 1995; Khosrowkhavar 2000).

A third issue relevant to the debate on Islamic feminism pertains to the definition of feminism and the nature of women’s movements world-

<sup>24</sup> The oppositional press includes left-wing periodicals as well as an array of liberal, conservative, and monarchist magazines and newspapers.

wide. As two scholars have noted, “‘Feminism’ is a contested term even in the present, and historical literature is full of kinds of feminists who would surely have had a hard time finding common ground: Nazi feminists and Jewish feminists, Catholic feminists and Islamic feminists, socialist feminists and utopian feminists, social feminists and equity feminists, imperial feminists and national feminists” (Rupp and Taylor 1999, 363). In this connection, a number of questions have been posed. Is “feminism” a Western ideology? What should women’s rights movements and organizations that eschew the label *feminist* be called? Are those who promote the advancement of women de facto feminists?<sup>25</sup> Is feminism defined and understood only through the writings and actions of Anglo-Americans? What of the writings and actions of feminists from developing countries? Can a more inclusive “global feminism” be developed that draws on the writings of scholars from around the world as well as from the activities of women’s movements and organizations?<sup>26</sup>

The debate on Islamic feminism is linked to the above three debates. We have seen how some Iranian feminists have shifted their focus from the unrelenting oppression of women in the IRI to an appreciation of resistance, empowerment, and change. It is in this context that they now analyze the activities of Iran’s Islamic feminists, who have been responsible for some legal reforms beneficial to women in the Islamic Republic. In the opposite camp, the detractors of Islamic feminism reject the possibilities for any improvements in women’s conditions or any reform of the Islamist system in Iran. On the other hand, as we have seen with Moghissi, they can argue, rather inconsistently, that the clerical state has undertaken legal reforms as concessions to women activists but that the proponents of Islamic feminism exaggerate the potential of Islamic feminism. In general, the detractors of Islamic feminism refuse to concede the few successes that Islamic feminists have made in overturning some discriminatory policies that were adopted in the early years of Islamization, mainly in the areas of employment and education. As such, they essentially deny women’s agency in the Islamic Republic. They also dismiss the reform movement in Iran, with which many of the Islamic feminists are associated, as unimportant or futile. Finally, they seem to define *feminism* essentially

<sup>25</sup> For an elaboration of “de facto feminism,” see Misciagno 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Feminists who seek to elaborate a more inclusive, global feminism include Charlotte Bunch and Roxanna Carillo (1990); Angela Miles (1996); and Val Moghadam (1996, 2000). Amrita Basu previously critiqued the idea of a global feminism (1995), but now she endorses it (personal communication and various public lectures).

as Anglo-American radical feminism and appear to reject the idea of an emerging global feminism.

### **An alternative analysis**

The vast gulf that exists between the two camps calls for an alternative analysis of Islamic feminism and of the debate. In my view, there can be no doubt of the importance of the writings and public pronouncements of “Islamic feminists” such as Sherkat, Taleghani, Faezeh Hashemi, and Jamileh Kadivar. *Zanan*, *Zan-e Rouz*, and the short-lived *Zan*, along with the secular feminist journals *Hoghough-e Zanan*, *Jenss-e Dovvom*, and *Negab-e Zanan* constitute a lively and widely read women’s press, which has succeeded in making highly visible the “question of women.” For example, in 1997 *Zanan* organized and reported on a roundtable discussion titled “What Are the Most Important Problems of Women in Iran?” Involving academic Farideh Farhi, lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, and reformist Abbas Abdi, the discussion touched on such issues as the reform movement in Iran, the limited nature of women’s rights, and the need for the press to enjoy more freedoms (*Zanan* 1997a). Another roundtable discussion by academics on the same subject expounded somewhat more moderate views. Here, Qolamabbas Tavassoli, Homa Zanjani-zadeh, and Nassrin Mossafa emphasized the importance of the family and of ensuring that gender role changes do not disrupt the family (*Zanan* 1997b). Clearly, the women’s press, and especially *Zanan*, provide a forum for the articulation of diverse views, including those that are officially unpopular. As such, the women’s press and those Islamic feminists associated with it are playing an important role in broadening the discursive universe of the Islamic Republic and in expanding legal literacy and gender consciousness among their readership. Also noteworthy is that the Islamic feminists who run *Zanan* and *Farzaneh* publish the writings of secular feminists.

The rereading of the Islamic texts is a central project of Islamic feminists. Out of their own religious conviction, Sherkat, Behrouzi, Gorji, and the former cleric Sa’idzadeh (now defrocked) engage in new interpretations of Islamic texts in order to challenge laws and policies that are based on orthodox, literalist, or misogynist interpretations. Other Islamic feminists such as Faezeh Hashemi boldly insist on the need for women judges and on more equitable inheritance law. As such, Islamic feminists are addressing some of the fundamentals of Islamic doctrine and of the gender system in Iran.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> A similar argument was made in a special issue of *Hamahang*, an expatriate left-wing newspaper published in Canada, focusing on feminist struggles in Iran. It draws parallels

Along with secular feminists (e.g., Kar 1999), Islamic feminists seek to improve women's status within the family and thus to revise Islamic family law. They point out the injustice of those sections of Iran's civil code that result in women's inferior status and subordinate position in the family. They also engage in theological reinterpretation to support the view that genuine Islam, as opposed to patriarchal interpretations, holds women in esteem and calls for an egalitarian status for them within the family and in the society. *Zanan's* position is that men's headship of the household is a male construct and, like other male privileges attributed to Sharia laws, has its roots in the culture and customs of the time of revelation (Mir-Hosseini 1996a, 315). As early as 1992, *Payam-e Hajjar*, published by Taleghani, had an article titled "Are Men Superior to Women?" that examined certain passages from the Qur'an that are usually interpreted as indicating men's dominion over women.<sup>28</sup> The author, Zahra Ibrahimi, sought to argue otherwise, from an Islamic perspective. She offered a practical recommendation as well: "the legislators of the Islamic Republic . . . add an article to the civil code, stipulating that men do not have the right to beat women" (1992, 36).

As a result of pressure from Islamic feminists, parliament and government bodies passed legislation to support working mothers, to allow unmarried women to study abroad, and to permit war widows to retain custody of their children and to receive financial compensation. The 1992 amendments to the divorce law enabled the court to place a monetary value on women's housework and entitle her to *ujrat al-mithl* (wages in kind) for the work she did during marriage—provided, however, that divorce is not initiated by her or is not caused by any fault of hers. A law was passed in 1997 requiring that payment of the *mahr* (dower) be in-

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between Islamic feminism and Christian and Jewish feminisms, stresses the antifundamentalist essence of Islamic feminism, and criticizes Moghissi for dogmatism. See Ne'mati n.d.

<sup>28</sup> For example, verse 34 of sura Nisa in the Qur'an: "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them; then if they obey you, take no further action against them. God is high, supreme" (see *The Koran* 1993, 64.) Imam Ali's sermon 79 in *Nahj al-Balagh* has helped to shape gender norms among Shia Muslims: "O people, women are deficient in belief, inheritance and wisdom. Their deficiency in belief is due to not praying and fasting during menses; their deficiency in wisdom is that witness of two women equals one man and in inheritance is that their share is half of men's. Therefore, avoid bad women and beware good ones; do not follow their good advice and actions so as not to encourage them to spread bad advice and actions." Such verses are said to demonstrate the subordinate status of women in the family, i.e., vis-à-vis their husbands.

dexed to inflation, thus creating a disincentive for unilateral divorce by men. Islamic feminists drafted a bill that would provide for more equitable inheritance for women and men—though it was defeated by parliament in 1998. They have objected to the penal code for its discrimination against women, whereby the “blood money” of a woman is half that of a man. An increasingly larger number of women have run for and been elected to parliament and local councils.

Some Iranian feminists, notably the lawyer Shirin Ebadi, have been actively involved in the democratic struggle in Iran and engaged in political debates in both the women’s press and the intellectual press. Among Ebadi’s many activities is her role as legal counsel to the family of the murdered dissidents Daryoush Forouhar and Parvaneh Esfandiari-Forouhar. In a May 1999 interview in Stockholm, Ebadi spoke of “this challenge [in Iran] between modernity and orthodoxy, between a group that is after safeguarding traditions and the other one that is struggling for more freedom.” She said that the most urgent need is “reforming the laws concerning people’s freedoms in social, political, individual, and religious domains” (Haeri 1999). In an article in *Jens-e Dovvom*, she describes the discriminatory laws women face, notes that the government of President Khatami has been unable to overturn them, but adds that his government at least has provided a more open atmosphere within which to discuss issues concerning women’s equality, democracy, and modernity (Ebadi 1999). In a talk given to an Iranian expatriate gathering in London on March 11, 2000, Ebadi criticized the Islamic penal code, *Qessas*, and pointed to the ways that it both encouraged political killings and protected killers of those deemed anti-Islamic. It should be noted, too, that *Zanan* reported on the July 1999 assault against student protesters and boldly printed the image of a bloodied shirt on its front cover (*Zanan* 1999).

#### **Independent and state feminists**

The Islamic discourse that Islamic feminists utilize is both genuine—an expression of their religious convictions—and a strategic attempt to acquire legitimacy that also serves to broaden the base of support for women’s rights in the IRI. But to address an issue raised by Moghissi: Who exactly may be deemed an “Islamic feminist”? Here it may be useful to identify some distinct groups. Independent feminists (e.g., Sherkat and Ebadi) maintain a distance from the organs of state power and work closely with secular feminists such as Kar, the critic and publisher Shahla Lahiji, and sociologist Nahid Motiee, as well as expatriate Iranian feminists. Independent feminists and other women’s rights activists revolve around

*Zanan*, *Houghough-e Zanan*, and *Jens-e Dovvom*, among other examples of the women's press. State feminists are associated with government or parliament. In addition to having government or parliamentary positions (e.g., Ebtekar, Shojai, Behrouzi, Gorji, Hashemi, Parvin Ma'arufi, Jaleh Jelodarzadeh), they may be involved with the establishment women's press (e.g., Rahnavard's association with *Zan-e Rouz*, Ommi's association with the Islamic women's studies journal *Farzaneh*). State feminists appear to be to the right of the independent feminists on cultural and gender issues. Some, for example, stress the importance of the cohesion of the family, stating that motherhood and domesticity keep the family together and society morally upright.

What independent and state feminists have in common is their rereading of the Qu'ran, their determination to contribute to the feminization of the political process, and their campaign for the modernization of family law. Their position on political and economic issues remains unclear and undeveloped; they have not formulated perspectives on economic development, poverty elimination, the welfare state, or civil society.

Among both independent and state feminists in the IRI are believing women who seek to counter patriarchal religious interpretations and highlight egalitarian or woman-centered understandings. I am sympathetic to the discursive strategy of these Islamic feminists, but I am concerned about the focus on the "correct" reading of the Islamic texts. A reasonable concern is that, so long as Islamic feminists remain focused on theological arguments rather than socioeconomic and political questions, and so long as their point of reference is the Qur'an rather than universal standards, their impact will be limited at best. At worst, their strategy could reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic system, help to reproduce it, and undermine secular alternatives. But this worst-case scenario very likely will not materialize, because most Islamic feminists combine their religious reinterpretations with a recognition of universal standards, such as the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Nevertheless, it is indeed the case that Islamic feminists, and especially the state feminists, are situated within and firmly accept the legal framework, institutions, and discursive universe of Islam and the IRI. For example, Jamileh Kadivar—reformist, parliamentarian, and professor—staunchly defended "Islamic human rights" at a contentious conference in Berlin in early April 2000. A year earlier, however, she had incurred the wrath of conservatives by calling for an abrogation of men's right to unilateral divorce and polygamy. Such inconsistencies are common among Islamic feminists.

In some ways, Iran's Islamic feminists are not substantially different from liberal feminists, particularly those in the United States, who work within the existing political system and seek to improve women's positions through the discursive framework of liberal capitalism. Of course, the substance of their respective gender critiques is different, and they work within two entirely different political and legal environments. But both groups of feminists work within and maintain the legitimacy of their respective political systems. Shahidian has criticized Iran's Islamic feminists for their failure to take up such issues as homosexuality and personal autonomy. And yet, U.S. liberal feminists have not called for economic and political transformation. The demands for sexual rights and equal opportunities in education and employment are entirely compatible with the capitalist system. What liberal feminists have not called for is a change in the system of taxation and in development policy that would alter American foreign policy and the distribution of wealth, transforming the lives of low-income women in the United States and elsewhere. In fact, one may suggest provocatively that those Islamic feminists who question the exclusive right of clerics and the *faqih* to interpret the Islamic texts and to define and implement Islamic jurisprudence are more subversive to the existing political system than are their U.S. liberal-feminist counterparts.

The analogy between Iran's Islamic feminists and liberal feminists in the United States has not been made elsewhere, although I believe it to be an apt one. Another pertinent argument, made by Tohidi, Najmabadi, Ne'mati, and others, concerns the parallels between the theological project of Iran's Islamic feminists and that of Christian feminists. But are they similar? Anne Sofie Roald explains the difference between them, and it suggests the limitations of Islamic feminism in its present phase. Christian feminist theologians such as Rosemary Reuther, Phyllis Bird, and Elisabeth Shussler Fiorenza "are part of an established scientific tradition within Christian theology" (Roald 1998, 30). This historical-critical method allows them to "perceive the Bible as written by human beings and in particular by men" (35). This is "an assumption which is not possible in an Islamic exegesis." Islamic feminist theologians seek to evaluate Islamic sources, criticize the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic sources, and stress the equality of men and women in the Qur'an. Their method "concentrates mainly on textual analysis and thus works methodologically in search of evidences to establish laws and regulations suitable for modern society" (40). Roald concludes that "the interpretation of the Islamic sources by women is a new project and the next decades will show us whether this project has any future" (41). In Iran, while some reformists

argue for period-based interpretations of the Qur'an, most seek to highlight the egalitarian tendencies within it as a way to frame contemporary legislation. None so far has suggested the fallibility of the Qur'an.

It is, at any rate, very difficult to win theological arguments. There will always be competing interpretations of the religious texts, and the power of the social forces behind it determines the dominance of each interpretation.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, I agree with Mojab on the limits of religious reinterpretation. Thus, although religious reform is salutary and necessary, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Women's rights and human rights are best promoted and protected in an environment of secular thought and secular institutions, including a state that defends the rights of all its citizens irrespective of religious affiliation, and a civil society with strong organizations that can constitute a check on the state. I will return to this issue at the conclusion of this article.

Statements made and positions taken by some state feminists illustrate the promises and perils and the strengths and weaknesses of Islamic feminism. Ebtekar—cofounder of the women's studies journal *Farzaneh* and high-ranking official in the Khatami government—visited the Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif (before it fell to the Taliban) to speak to Afghan women. She assured them that “your sisters in the Islamic Republic are taking measures to establish Islamic human rights of women in the world which will contribute to the improvement of the status of women and provide progress in all areas for the Moslem communities around the world” (Heinrich 1998). But what are Islamic human rights? How do they differ from rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or in CEDAW—both of which were drafted by persons from various national, cultural, and religious backgrounds? What are the rights of minorities, and in what ways can there be equality for all citizens, in an Islamic legal

<sup>29</sup> Many Islamic feminists are keen to show that men and women are equal and that women are respected in the Islamic texts. Yet other scholars from the Muslim world have pointed out that in Islam the male-female relationship is assumed to be highly sexual, that women are considered to have sexual power over men that needs to be controlled by veiling, that permanent marriage is a sale, and that temporary marriage (as practiced in the Shia Iranian tradition) is a lease of female sexuality. In an original and provocative article, Fatemeh E. Moghadam (1994) argues that the Islamic practice of *mahr*, or dowry, represents the sale of female sexuality, and that the commoditization of female sexuality through *mahr* reinforces Muslim women's subordination within the family and their economic marginalization in the labor force. Turning to Christianity, it should be noted that two hundred years after the Christian world's Enlightenment and a long process of secularization, American Southern Baptists passed a resolution in 1998 calling on wives to defer to their husbands in all family matters. In Israel, the Orthodox and patriarchal interpretation of Judaism is the dominant one, backed by the state.

system that is premised on differences between men and women and between Muslims and non-Muslims?

Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of the former president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1990–97), is an outspoken advocate of women's rights, especially the right of women and girls to engage in athletics. A member of the past parliament, she had been an extremely popular candidate, winning one million votes. (She lost her seat in the February 2000 elections.) In a remarkable act, she marched in solidarity with students during the July 1999 protests. In Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's film within a film *Banoo-Ye Ordibehesht* (The May lady), she boldly states that the problems of women in Iran result from the fact that all the judges are men and that there are no women judges in Iran. In a 1997 interview she stated that "we generally agree that the role of women on the Iranian political scene has improved in the last years but still there are some basic problems such as an Iranian female official cannot leave the country without her husband's permission. Is this not a basic obstacle to the basic right of a woman, whether official or non-official?" In response to a question about national reconciliation, she was adamant that all Iranians regardless of political views had a place in the country and its system: "I think the Iranian people belong to Iran and live in Iran and tolerated all the problems in the last 17 years and even went to the war-fronts. Even though they might not have even been a Muslim or a Hezbollah, they might have only done that due to their national sentiments and due to their love for their country" (Hashemi 1997).

That she is a defender of the existing political system, albeit of its reformist wing, is evident. In the same interview, Hashemi continues,

They should still be respected as a resident as long as they do not act outside the legal framework. We have a constitution and this constitution has set freedom for them and as long as the law is respected, the government should also respect them. The law must confront illegalities. No social strata should be put under pressure just because one day they might do something wrong. I respect all the people in Iran, regardless of their ideologies. For me there is no difference. An administration can only be successful when this national unity is maintained, if not then the administration itself will be the first victim.

On the issue of veiling, she is adamant, if contradictory. Referring to Turkey, she said, "I think that unfortunately in some countries Western norms are imposed on women. Hijab is an indisputable symbol for Muslim

women. Muslim women should not be deprived. Although Turkey is an Islamic country, women are thrown out of universities because of Hijab” (Hashemi 1997). She makes no reference to the fact that in Iran veiling is compulsory rather than a freely chosen mode of dress or expression of identity. Nor does she refer to the fact that Iran’s constitutional provisions on freedom of association and on the prohibition of torture have been routinely and systematically violated over the years. Subsequently, Hashemi changed her views on veiling. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections of February 2000, she declared that *hejab* should be voluntary and not mandatory. This was the boldest challenge yet to religious orthodoxy, state policy, and patriarchal norms.

Hashemi and other Islamic feminists sometimes refer to the goals of democracy, civil society, and equality for women and religious minorities. However, to the extent that they raise these issues, their discussion of them tends to be very general and nonthreatening.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Iran’s constitution—as well as its family law and penal law, both based on the Shariat—will have to undergo complete revision, if those objectives are to be achieved. Moreover, the building of civil society calls for a specific kind of state. Civil society presupposes a state that enforces universal legal norms and guarantees protection of civil and human rights regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, and class. An Islamic state cannot and will not undertake this because it defines citizenship rights on the basis of sex and religion.

### **Conclusion: Toward civil society and global feminism**

Does Islamic feminism challenge or reinforce the fusion of religion and politics/law? Najmabadi celebrates *Zanan* for its receptivity to non-Islamic writers, which she sees as blurring the divide between religious and secular thought (1998, 77). And yet there is a need for separation of mosque and state, for a secular political system, and for a deepening of secular thought, even though there are different paths to and models of secularism and Iran will have to develop its own.

The efforts of believing women of the monotheistic faiths to subject their religious texts to a feminist rereading, or to locate and emphasize the women-friendly and egalitarian precepts within their religious texts, are to be supported. This is a legitimate and historically necessary strategy to improve the status of women and to modernize religious thought. In

<sup>30</sup> The notable exception is Shirin Ebadi, whose articles on politics and the law in *Jameh-e Saalem* have been rather audacious.

this respect, my position is different from that of Moghissi and Shahidian, who dismiss feminist theology and deny its wider implications. And yet, one cannot insist, as some Islamic reformists do, that the Islamic arguments are the only ones that matter and that change will occur only as a result of the reform movement within Islam. Islam in Iran may be experiencing a kind of Reformation, but what will be equally if not more important for long-term social change in Iran (and elsewhere in the Muslim world) is an Enlightenment. As such, the contributions of nonreligious thinkers and activists, whether inside or outside Iran, will continue the process of democratization and building of civil society that was initiated by the Constitutional Revolution earlier in this century.<sup>31</sup> In any event, it is clear that despite the changes of the 1990s, the IRI is mired in a political, economic, and cultural crisis that will only be overcome by major changes to its system of governance. The continuing battle between conservatives and reformists (including Islamic feminists) attests to this.

What are some elements of a system of governance and a legal system that could ensure greater social, gender, religious, and ethnic equality? Some of these changes have been suggested by certain intellectuals within the reform movement.<sup>32</sup> Here I will offer some needed changes from a secular feminist (Marxist-feminist) perspective. Religious doctrine should not be the basis of laws, policies, or institutions. Iran's constitution (or any other constitution) should not state that "Islam [or Christianity or Judaism or Hinduism] is the official [or state or national] religion." Family law should not derive from religious texts, whether in Iran or in Israel. Blasphemy laws should be removed, and religion should be the subject of historical and critical inquiry. All citizens should be equal before the law, with equal rights and obligations. Civil, political, and social rights of

<sup>31</sup> The Constitutional Revolution in Iran was an incomplete project that began with radical elements and ended in the first Pahlavi dictatorship. For an elaboration, see Afary 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Reformists have written on the need for civil society, democracy, and freedom of the press (an Islamic democracy) in such magazines as *Hamshabri*, *Iran-e Farda*, *Jame'eh*, *Jame'eh Saalem*, *Salam*, *Neshat*, and others. None, however, goes so far as to call for a secular political system. This is partly because such a discussion is currently illegal and partly because many reformists are attached to the Islamic system, which they seek to make more open and thus more conducive to their political power ambitions. One prominent intellectual who has combined a radical reinterpretation of Islam with an equally radical interrogation of clerical governance and the need for democracy, civil society, and freedom of expression is Abdolkarim Soroush, whose writings have appeared in *Kiyan* and elsewhere. Much of the left considers him unacceptable because of his role in the Islamic cultural revolution of the early 1980s. And yet, his philosophical writings appear to be innovative and important. For an elaboration of his writings, see Boroujerdi 1996; and Vahdat (in press).

citizens should be protected by the state and by the institutions of civil society. This includes worker participation in decision making and an active role for independent unions, professional associations, citizen groups, and so on. It should be noted that Islam, like other monotheistic religions, does have humane, compassionate, and egalitarian aspects. These may *inspire* civil codes, political processes, social policies, and economic institutions. For example, the social justice foundations of religious thought represent an important balance to the harsh discipline of the capitalist market. The ban on usury in Islam and Catholicism is in conflict with capitalism's creation of wealth through nonproductive financial transactions and speculation, and this, to my mind, is progressive and should be emphasized. Religious belief should be respected, and religious institutions should have a place in civil society, but religion should not dominate the state and the law.

I end by asking whether Islamic feminism is indeed feminism. Is Islamic feminism an indigenous alternative to secular or Western-inspired feminism? Is it an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms? Or is it part of the already diversified and colorful spectrum of the transnational women's movement and a contributor to a "global feminism"? There is no question that Islamic feminists have been inspired by the writings and collective action of feminists from the West and the third world. Any reading of the women's press in Iran reveals that Iranian women activists and scholars, including those who define themselves as Muslim or Islamic and eschew the label "feminist," engage with transnational feminism. In a thought-provoking book, Patricia Misciagno argues for a "bottom-up" or materialist approach to feminist identity that hinges on women's praxis rather than their ideology. She defines "de facto feminist praxis" as "activity that runs counter to the ideology of patriarchy, even while not directly addressing the issue of patriarchy as an ideology" (Misciagno 1997, 70–71). Similarly, Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor note that "a concentration solely on ideas ignores the fact that feminists are social movement actors situated in an organizational and movement context" (1999, 364). Their historical study shows that "the meaning of feminism has changed over time and from place to place and is often disputed." They emphasize the need to understand "what women (or men) in a specific historical location believed" but also "how they constructed, sometimes through conflict with one another, a sense of togetherness" (364). Feminist disputes, they argue, "take place within a social movement community that, as it evolves, encompasses those who see gender as a major category of analysis, who critique female disadvantage, and who work to improve women's situations." They conclude by asserting that "in every group, in every place,

at every time, the meaning of 'feminism' is worked out in the course of being and doing" (382).

The above analysis sheds light on our question and points the way toward a resolution of the debate on Islamic feminism. For if feminism has always been contested, if feminists should be defined by their praxis rather than by a strict ideology, and if a feminist politics is shaped by its specific historical, political, and cultural contexts, then it should be possible to identify Islamic feminism as one feminism among many. Indeed, in my view, it is not particularly useful to create absolute boundaries between Islamic feminism, Western feminism, Latin American feminism, African feminism, Jewish feminism, and so on. In the same way that liberal, socialist, Marxist, radical, cultural, and postmodern feminisms (not to mention equality and difference feminisms, and first- and second-wave feminisms) are part of the feminist tradition, so are the various regional manifestations part of the evolving political philosophy of feminism and the social movement of women. At the beginning of the new millennium what appears to be emerging is a global women's movement and a philosophy that not only draws on the feminist "classics" but also reflects the social realities and concerns of women in various parts of the world. To a very great extent, the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the end of the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995, is a manifesto of the global women's movement. It describes the problems facing the vast majority of the women of the world and prescribes a set of actions to solve the problems involving government, international agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and the women's movement. That the Platform for Action was finally agreed on by governments and women's organizations after many disagreements confirms the multifaceted nature of global feminism and the capacity of the world's women to overcome some ideological and class differences and agree on measures necessary for women's equality and empowerment.

Feminism is a theoretical perspective and a practice that criticizes social and gender inequalities, aims at women's empowerment, and seeks to transform knowledge—and in some interpretations, to transform socio-economic structures, political power, and international relations. Women, and not religion, should be at the center of that theory and practice. It is not possible to defend as feminist the view that women can attain equal status only in the context of Islam. This is a fundamentalist view, not one compatible with feminism. And yet, around the world there will be different strategies that women will pursue toward empowerment and transformation. We are still grappling with understanding and theorizing those diverse political strategies. In light of this, it serves no purpose to insist

on a narrow definition of feminism, as Moghissi and Shahidian appear to do. And when one recalls the difficult period that the Iranian left went through after the Revolution, when disunity and fragmentation reigned, it seems obvious that harsh attacks and denunciations of some feminists by other feminists is hardly the way forward. This can only impede rather than contribute to dialogue, knowledge, coalition building, and collective action.

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