

Columbia University
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
Human Rights Studies Master of Arts Program

Pushing Boundaries: Islamic Feminism in Iran

Fatima Aslam

Thesis adviser: Joseph Chuman

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

October 2017

Abstract

Since the 1990s, a powerful feminist movement has emerged in Iran led by women who are challenging traditional authority and re-interpreting the Quran for themselves. The way this movement evolves will determine the future direction and development of the women's right movement in Iran and in the larger Muslim world. In this thesis, I examine the life of two influential Iranian Islamic feminists, Shahla Sherkat and Azam Taleghani, in order to understand and assess their strategies in terms of expanding women's rights in Iran. This paper begins by providing a brief discussion of the twentieth century social and political transformation in Iran that propelled Sherkat and Taleghani to get involved in the Islamic feminism movement in Iran. Next, it discusses how the two women relate Islam with Feminism, how they approached the Quran as a basis for reform, and how they expanded the presence of women in the political sphere of Iran. Through this thesis, I hope to show that change is happening – and more often than not, it is led by Muslim women.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Purpose and Significance of the Thesis	7
Research Methodology.....	9
Literature Review.....	10
Historical Background: Azam Taleghani and Shahla Sherkat.....	17
Islam and Feminism: Reconciliation.....	22
Re-interpreting the Quran	30
Political Advancement of Women.....	41
Conclusion.....	49
Bibliography.	53

Introduction

“Given the current realities of the Muslim world, in which the Islamists have the upper hand in defining the terms of reference for political and gender discourses, I would maintain that only those prepared to engage with Islam’s sacred texts and its legal traditions can bring change from within.”

— Ziba Mir Hosseini, 2006

In 2003, when Iranian human rights activist and lawyer Shirin Ebadi won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to promote the rights of women, she was applauded globally but immensely criticized and harassed by the Iranian government¹. In Iran, the struggle for women’s rights has been fought within a complex religious and patriarchal power structure that severely restricts the social and political space given to women. The World Economic Forum ranked Iran number 140 out of 144² nations in terms of the world’s worst country for gender equality where women continue to face several legal and social discriminations including forced veiling and restrictions on travelling without the written permission of their husbands. The impact of this discrimination is evident when one considers that only 16.2 percent of Iran’s women are in the workforce, compared with 72.1 percent of men and merely 3.1 percent parliamentary seats held by women³. While throughout the 20th century, Iranian women have gone through multiple changes in their political and legal status – from the imposed secularization under Reza Shah

¹Azadeh Moaveni, “Why Iran Is Targeting Nobel Winner Ebadi” *Time* (November 30, 2009) <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1943400,00.html>

² World Economic Forum. *The Global Gender Gap Report* (2017), <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017>.

³ UN Human Development. *Human Development Report* (2016), <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2016-report/>. Table 5: Gender Inequality Index, 215.

Pahlavi, and later his son, Mohammad Reza Shah to the conservative religious identity promoted under Ayatollah Khomeini - the status and role of women in modern Iran is largely defined by the Islamic regime established after the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The establishment of the Islamic regime in 1979 had two key effects on the rights of women in Iran. First, the new regime made it mandatory for all Iranian women to wear the veil in public arguing that the Western image of women, which was heavily promoted under the Shah, had corrupted Iranian women and destroyed the modesty that is found in Islam⁴. The veil was seen to free “the country of alien ideologies and establish women’s independence from Western domination and styles...it is a rejection of all relations and beliefs that reduce her to the level of a naked yet sexy doll...and saves her from man’s uncontrollable lust⁵”. In other words, according to the new regime, the veil and segregation were essential for the social order of Iranian society. While the veil restricted the women in many ways, it also granted them, quite paradoxically, increased access to education and public spaces⁶. Iranian Anthropologist and Activist Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that the veil made “public space morally correct in the eyes of traditionalist families, it legitimized women’s public presence⁷.” According to national consensus data, only 17.42 percent of the female population was literate in 1966 while in 1996 the number increased to 74.2 percent⁸. In addition, Brookings Institute reports that Iranian women are outnumbering men two to one in the entering classes of universities⁹. This trend, as we will learn, is perhaps

⁴ Nikki R Keddie. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (2007): 23 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24357968>.

⁵ Farzaneh Milani. *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992), 38.

⁶ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000) 7.

⁷ Ibid 7.

⁸ Zahra Mila Elmi, "Educational Attainment in Iran." *Middle East Institute* (January 2009) <http://www.mei.edu/content/educational-attainment-iran>.

⁹ Djavad Salehi Isfahani. "Are Iranian Women Overeducated?" *Brookings* (July 28, 2016) <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/are-iranian-women-overeducated/>.

one of the most positive effect of the Islamization process and one that has altered gender discourse in Iran.

The second key impact of the Islamic Revolution was the enhanced legal discrimination faced by women on the basis of gender. One of the revolutionary government's first acts was to suspend the Family Protection Law of 1967 and dismantle Family Courts¹⁰. Women not only lost their right to file for divorce and gain child custody, but also suffered as restrictions on polygamy were removed and marriage age was reduced to nine¹¹. In addition, the Islamic Law of Retribution was also approved, which made stoning and flogging a legal punishment for adultery and violation of Islamic dress codes. A committee, known as the Council of Guardians, was set up and given the task of ensuring that no new law contradicted with Islamic values and law¹². This Council comprised of twelve male jurists who were selected by Khomeini himself. The lack of female representation and the unchecked power gave the Council ultimate authority to strike down that most gender-progressive laws on religious grounds and it has not hesitated to use this authority over the years¹³.

While the freedoms and rights granted to women were severely limited under the Islamic Republic, increased access to education and information technology in the 1980s and 1990s led to the emergence of a powerful feminist challenge. "It is," writes Mir-Hossieni, "history's irony that the revolution that brought the clerics into power also sowed the seeds of a new intellectual and popular movement."¹⁴ This feminist force is led by women who challenge the discriminatory political rhetoric and policies of the regime not with a foreign ideology, but with

¹⁰ Keddie, "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." 23.

¹¹ Ibid 24.

¹² David E Thaler, Alireza Nader, and Shahram Chubin, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads an Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), 29.

¹³ Ibid 30.

¹⁴ Ziba Mir Hosseini. "Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?" *Middle East Research and Information Project*. (June 2006) <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061606>.

Islam. Islamic feminism looks towards Islam for gender equality and considers the Quran to be compatible with the basic principles of feminism¹⁵. Today, Islamic Feminists are engaging critically with Islamic texts, opening them up for feminist interpretations, and challenging the authority of the religious establishment in order to “win back, inch by inch, the grounds which they lost through re-islamization policies in Iran¹⁶”.

Purpose and Significance of the Thesis

This thesis will attempt to answer why and how the participation of Islamic feminists has been crucial to advancement of women’s rights in Iran and, additionally, seek to understand the various strategies used by these feminists, whether they were successful and how their success can be measured. It will focus on the lives of two prominent Islamic feminists, Azam Taleghani and Shahla Sherkat, and analyze how their efforts have succeeded in feminizing Iran so much so that almost three decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, “not only have women not been excluded from public life and politics but their participation has actually increased, although in different guises and according to different rules¹⁷”. Both as elected politicians and as activists working within the Islamic framework, Sherkat and Taleghani struggled for women’s rights and their participation in the spheres of power. In conducting an analysis of Taleghani and Sherkat’s life, this study hopes to answer the following questions: How are Islamic Feminists advancing the rights of women in Iran? Where have they been successful and where have they failed? Is Islamic Feminism a useful force for the advancement of women’s rights?

¹⁵John L Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003).

¹⁶Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2002), 11.

¹⁷ Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, 7.

While there are many studies of Islamic feminism as movement, very few of them explore the role of “trespassers” in detail. Trespassers is the term given by Hamideh Sedgih to women who have a strong affiliation with Islam but “resonate, progressively, the gender concerns of secular opponent of women”¹⁸. Trespassers are, according to Sedgih, “unfixed and changing¹⁹” as their views on gender relations have evolved immensely overtime. In this sense, Sherkat and Taleghani, who were once strong supporters of Islamic regime, have been two of the most influential trespassers in advancing women’s rights in Iran in the last three decades. By understanding how Sherkat and Taleghani brought about change while working within an Islamic paradigm, the international community along with Iranian feminists, both Islamic and secular, can better support the feminist movement in Iran and possibly replicate it in other Islamic societies.

The war on terror, frequently termed as the war against radical Islam, that followed 9/11 has increased the distance between many Muslims and the international human rights system. Many Muslims have come to view the war as one waged against their religion and way of life which has led to a hypocritical perception of the human rights system which is seen largely as an modern extension of Western colonialism²⁰. In this atmosphere, Islamic Feminism can be a strategic force in promoting grass-root gender reform as it is more likely to find support amongst the public and progressive clerics in Islamic societies. Given the rise of political Islam globally, it is crucial for those working for the advancement of women’s rights to develop a deeper understanding of the complex religious and political structure present in this region. Isobel Coleman, a foreign policy expert and former senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations,

¹⁸ Hamideh Sedgih. *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 267.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

argues that “the stability of our world as we know it will likely be determined in this volatile part of the globe²¹” and the struggle for women’s justice is “central to many of the most pressing American foreign policy concerns: alleviating poverty, promoting economic development, improving global health, building civil society, strengthening weak and failing states, assisting democratization, tempering extremism²².” Ultimately, this thesis hope to show that change is happening in Iran – and more often than not, it is being led by Muslim women.

Research Methodology

In order to answer the questions proposed above, research for this thesis was primarily conducted on the lives of Shahla Sherkat and Azam Taleghani with a specific focus on three areas: their association of Islam with Feminism, approach towards the Quran, and influence in political sphere of Iran.

There are two main reasons that Sherkat and Taleghani were chosen for the purpose of this thesis. Firstly, these women come from traditional religious backgrounds and were once devout supporters of the Islamic Revolution. The shift in their ideology from supporters of the Islamic Republic to one of its most profound critics is worth further examination. Both women are willing to face any threat, whether it is the threat of going to jail or being exiled, for a cause that they voluntarily committed to. Secondly, as they are prominent figures in Iran there is a lot of published material available about their life and activities, particularly primary sources. This thesis engages closely with articles written about and by Taleghani and Sherkat along with interviews and secondary literature.

²¹ Isobel Coleman, *Paradise beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), xvii.

²² Ibid.

The research method has primarily consisted of qualitative analytical research based on secondary and primary sources. The main sources used in this research to understand Islamic Feminism are, Margot Badran's *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, Isobel Coleman's *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East* and Leila Ahmad's *Women and Gender in Islam Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. To understand Islamic Feminism specifically in the context of Iran and Taleghani and Sherkat's role within it, the key sources used are Ziba Mir-Hosseini's *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* and "Beyond Islam and Feminism", Sanam Vakil's *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, and Valentine Moghadam's *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. For a critique of Islamic Feminism, the sources used were Hamideh Moghissi's *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* and Shahrzad Mojab's "Theorizing the Politics of "Islamic Femenism." Additionally, I have used various journal articles, translations of news articles, interviews of Sherkat and Taleghani, and human rights reports.

Literature Review

As this thesis will attempt to evaluate the work of Islamic Feminist Iran in terms of advancing women's rights, this section will review existing literature on how to define Islamic Feminism and place it in the context of human rights. It will also briefly highlight some key criticisms of Islamic Feminism as a force to advance women's rights.

In her book *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East*, Isobel Coleman describes Islamic Feminism as an "important emotional and intellectual

stepping-stone—and tactic—to meet the demands of the modern world²³.” According to Coleman, this movement found its intellectual beginning in the late 19thth century with the rise of Muslim scholars who attempted to reform Islamic traditions and meet the needs of modern society through the reinterpretation of the basic principles of Islam²⁴. The role of women in an Islamic society was one of the most controversial issues that emerged in the modern era as Islamic societies faced immense criticism for their treatment of women particularly the existence of social seclusion, heavy veiling, and the practice of polygamy. The response of most modern Islamic scholars, and Coleman highlights a series of them²⁵, was to acknowledge that the oppression of women did in fact exist in the Muslim world, but it had no basis in the Islam. These scholars believed that Muslim scholars over the course of Islamic history had developed a strong resistance to change, which was to blame for the backwardness of the Islamic community. What these reformists were advocating for, however, was indeed a radical notion - that the Quran could be revisited and understood in a new light.

Coleman argues that Islamic feminism is fundamentally an extension of this earlier intellectual movement which considers gender equality as a value inherently found in Islam but one that is overshadowed by the patriarchal traditions and conservative interpretations promoted by the religious establishment²⁶. She sees critical engagement with and reinterpretation of sacred Islamic texts as one of the defining characteristics of Islamic feminism: “What many of the men and women today are trying to do within Islam is argue that times change, and you have to read them [Islamic texts] differently. You have to think about them in the present, not only in the past,

²³ Coleman, *Paradise beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East*, 275.

²⁴ Ibid 41.

²⁵ Ibid 42-49.

²⁶ Ibid 40.

and find new meanings and new ways to circle that square²⁷.” This ability to work within the values of Islam while being able challenge aspects of traditional Islamic orthodoxy allows Islamic feminism to have a broader appeal in Islamic societies and succeed where secular movements have failed to do so.²⁸

Margot Badran identifies the goal of Islamic Feminism to be two-fold: to promote the Quranic notion of full human equality while dismantling patriarchal ideas and practices publicized in the name of Islam²⁹. The first goal, the promotion of full human equality, forms the core of Islamic feminism and that, according to her, has not been found in Muslims’ secular feminism³⁰. She argues that while secular feminism advocated for gender equality in the public sphere and settled for complementary roles in the private, Islamic feminism promotes the notion of full equality of humans in all spheres and finds basis for this the Quran³¹. The second goal is to end patriarchal ideas and practices by using Quranic verses to challenge the notion of male authority over women, drawing attention to verses that specifically support gender equality, and promoting gender-sensitive interpretations of the Quran³². Islamic Feminists, Badran highlights, believe that the principle of gender equality in the Quran was overlooked historically by male jurists which has resulted in the discriminatory laws and customs. A strong promoter of the movement, Badran concludes that “Islamic Feminism stands to benefit us all, Muslims of both sexes, as well as non-Muslims living side by side with Muslims everywhere³³.”

²⁷ Isobel Coleman, "Islamic Feminists Transforming Middle East", *NPR* (April 27, 2010) <https://www.npr.org/2010/04/27/126309699/islamic-feminists-transforming-middle-east>.

²⁸ Ibid 85.

²⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011), 247.

³⁰ Ibid 250.

³¹ Ibid 250.

³² Ibid 247.

³³ Ibid 250.

In her article “Women in search of Common Ground: Between Islamic and International Human Rights Law”, Ziba Mir-Hosseini highlights the parallel rise of both political Islam and the international system based on the idea of universal human rights. The consolidation of power by the Islamic regime in Iran 1979 was followed months later by adoption of CEDAW in an effort to end gender-based discrimination. Mir- Hosseini describes these developments, “as a clash between two opposing yet equally powerful frames of reference³⁴.” While the Islamic regime set up a legal system based on religion, the international community moved towards a universal and secular application of law. However, she argues, that both Islamic and human rights law failed to produce real change for women and this propelled scholars and activists to search for a middle ground between both these systems³⁵.

She considers Islamic Feminism to be the “unwanted child of political Islam³⁶” and an urgent response to the increasingly discriminatory political rhetoric and legal system promoted by the Islamist regimes. Islamic feminists, Mir-Hosseini, argues were quick to realize that the struggle for women’s rights must be posed within the Islamic framework and this can be done by engaging closely with Islamic texts³⁷. Islamic Feminism is thus, “a gender discourse that was and is feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and sources of legitimacy³⁸.” This internal challenge posed by Islamic Feminists, according to Mir-Hosseini, has made it increasingly difficult for the Iranian government to hide under the cloak of cultural

³⁴ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Women in Search of Common Ground: Between Islamic and International Human Rights Law” quoted in Anver M. Emon and Mark S. Ellis, *Islamic Law and International Human Rights Law: Searching for Common Ground?* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 292.

³⁵ Ibid 302.

³⁶ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Feminist Voices in Islam: Promise and Potential," *OpenDemocracy* (November 2012) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ziba-mir-hosseini/feminist-voices-in-islam-promise-and-potential>.

³⁷ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism." *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629. doi:10.1086/508085.

³⁸ Ibid 640.

relativism and continue to reject international human rights treaties³⁹. While the government could dismiss international law and organizations with the argument that they don't comply with religious standards, it is harder to overlook an internal movement that is demanding change. Mir-Hosseini explains this when she writes, "When the question and demands for change and adoption come from inside the tradition, to resolve the crisis, the tradition has to respond, for example by adopting a new idea of value and making it inherent to the tradition⁴⁰."

In addition to reforming local tradition, Islamic Feminists in Iran have also developed links and established strong global networks of activists in order to support their goals⁴¹. A prominent example of this is Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice for women in Islam that brings together over 250 scholars and activists from different Muslim nations. Members of Musawah combine progressive interpretations of the Quran and application of universal human rights principles with grass-root activism in order to bring about legal and social change in Muslim societies⁴². As one of the founders of Musawah, Mir-Hosseini the key to the movement's success in Muslim societies is its ability to build a consensus between women's rights activists from different backgrounds - particularly between secular and religious women - and to be able to approach the Quran as a source of empowerment and offer Islamic alternatives to the traditional interpretations⁴³. The goal was Musawah was to accomplish this while avoiding "those who want to impose patriarchal interpretations of Islam's sacred texts⁴⁴" and "those who pursue a neo-colonialist hegemonic global project in the name of human rights and feminism⁴⁵."

³⁹ Mir-Hosseini quoted in Emon, Ellis and Glahn, 301.

⁴⁰ Ibid 302.

⁴¹ Ibid 292.

⁴² Ibid 299.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

While many scholar-activists like Mir-Hosseini have deemed Islamic feminism as an important force for the advancement of women's right in Islamic societies, there are others who consider it as an unrealistic and ineffective concept. Shahrzad Mojab, an activist and professor at the University of Toronto, views Islamic feminism as a contradiction and a largely counterproductive movement⁴⁶. Mojab argues that Islamic principles are fundamentally patriarchal and by using Islam as a force for women's rights, Islamic feminists indirectly support the traditional patriarchal system and the unequal gender relations imposed by Islamist authority⁴⁷. This includes, she highlights, women's journals such as *Zanan* headed by Shahla Sherkat which advance a progressive re-interpretation of Islamic sources. "Islam", she writes, "cannot be degenderized into a neutral observer of religion⁴⁸" and for feminist interpretations of religious texts to be allowed to lead to reform of the law it would "require either the radical revision or discarding of its theological basis⁴⁹." In other words, in the case of Iran, the only way for women to radical reform is through the dismantling of the Islamic state⁵⁰.

In her book, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haideh Moghissi also criticizes Islamic feminism as a concept rooted in gender hierarchy that cannot be reconciled with the secular and democratic concept of feminism⁵¹." According to Moghissi, the Quran contains a highly developed system of gender hierarchy with gender-specific roles and obligations that have been translated into the Islamic legal system⁵². Feminism, on the other hand, is a concept grounded on the fact that there should be no discrimination of roles on the basis on gender. This poses, according to Moghissi, a fundamental question: "How could a religion based on gender

⁴⁶ Shahrzad Mojab, "Theorizing the Politics of "Islamic Femenism," *Femenist Review* 69 (Winter, 2001): 131.

⁴⁷ Ibid 134.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 126.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 136.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 140.

⁵¹ Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, 126.

⁵² Ibid 141.

hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women's equality with men?⁵³” In addition, Islamic Feminism, according to Moghissi, assumes that all Muslim women identify with it and this undermines the struggle of many secular voices “which are raised against the region's stifling Islamification process⁵⁴.” In other words, Islamic feminism does not allow other, possibly more effective, discourses and strategies to operate.

Although such criticisms are partly justified, this thesis hopes to show the significant changes brought forth in Iran through Islamic feminism. While the argument that secularism is the ideal system to ensure gender equality is valid, we must move forward with the acceptance of the fact that an Islamic regime exists in Iran and the political, legal and social order largely operates within an Islamic framework. International human rights law alone does not speak to a majority of Muslim women in Iran and to produce change, one must provide alternative ideas and solutions in an a language that is familiar to them. What ultimately matters is how we can improve the position of women – and this goal is common amongst both secular and Islamic feminists. This thesis attempts to show is that the struggle of Islamic feminism, even if operates within the Islamic framework, has brought forth significant improvements for women and, more importantly, has led to a change in the attitudes of Iranians. As Mir-Hossieni writes: “The legal gains and losses of women in Iran, and now in Afghanistan and Iraq, testify to the fact that there can be no sustainable gains unless patriarchal notions of family and gender relations are debated, challenged and redressed within an Islamic framework⁵⁵.”

Shahla Sherkat and Azam Taleghani: Historical Background

⁵³ Ibid 126.

⁵⁴ Ibid 137-138.

⁵⁵ Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism." 644.

Shehla Sherkat was born in 1956 to a traditional middle-class family in the cultural city of Isfahan located four hours south of the Iranian capital of Tehran. Like most girl belonging to middle-class families, she studied at a traditional Islamic school and wore a hijab from a young age⁵⁶. In an interview with BBC correspondent Jane Howard, Sherkat recalled attending elementary school in this dichotomous atmosphere: “He [her father] was very particular about the hijab and we even wore our headscarf to school and sometimes the chador too... At the time I went to school, there would be girls sitting next to me with miniskirts, but I was never made to feel uncomfortable⁵⁷.”

The Iran of Sherkat’s childhood was a monarchy under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi who had been aggressively modernizing Iran and promoting its Persian identity at the expense of its Islamic one. However, by the end of 1950s, there was an increasing dissatisfaction with the Shah’s rule and the level of foreign involvement in Iran. Hence, Sherket, who was still relatively young in the 1960s, grew up in a nation that was becoming increasingly closer to its Islamic identity.

Sherkat, in pursuit of a higher education, moved to Tehran and joined the Tehran University to pursue her studies in clinical psychology⁵⁸. The years at Tehran University were some of the most formative years of Sherkat’s life as she interacted and worked alongside people with whom, at least at the first glance, she had nothing in common except their passion for education and politics. It was also in her university years that a grass-root movement against the Shah was taking place and she found herself constantly drawn towards this political movement

⁵⁶ Sanam Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 121.

⁵⁷ Jane Mary Howard, *Inside Iran: Women's Lives*, (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2002), 143.

⁵⁸ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 121.

and struggle for women's rights. She said, "Before the 1979 Revolution, social participation was only for the elite or women who were married to power. But the Revolution was a mass movement, and as a result many women across social sectors became interconnected. We left the four walls of our houses and became participants in new ways⁵⁹."

Similar to the traditional upbringing of Sherkat, Azam Taleghani was born in 1944 and raised in a traditional household in Tehran. As a child, Taleghani found herself in a household that was extremely politically active despite the dangers associated with such involvement⁶⁰. Her father, Ayatollah Said Mahmoud Taleghani, was a prominent cleric who fought against the Shah's regime and believed that modernization must be led by Islamic not Western values. This familial atmosphere gave Taleghani both a comprehensive understanding of Islam and a progressive outlook. Her father, Ayatollah Taleghani, believed that "women have many skills and potential for growth but even they themselves don't realize their skills and rights⁶¹." He did not compel his daughter to wear the veil but instead allowed her to make up her own mind. Taleghani made the choice to wear the veil and says: "It is only Western propaganda that claims the chador is something that causes the degradation of women. It is simply a type of dress. Those who believe in tradition keep the chador, just as Indian women wear the sari⁶²."

The change in the political environment in Iran set Sherkat and Taleghani on a life-long course that they are known for today. In Iran, the atmosphere was changing, as more and more young people became involved in the movement against the Shah. Sherkat participated in the Islamic Revolution under Khomeini, demonstrating in the streets against the Shah and later

⁵⁹ Elizabeth M Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women*. (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 146.

⁶⁰ Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran* (Free Press, 2005), 110.

⁶¹ Ibid 110.

⁶² "Women in Iran Chafe at Role Since the Revolution", *The New York Times*, 28 March 1981, www.nytimes.com/1981/03/29/world/women-in-iran-chafe-at-role-since-the-revolution.html.

working as an editor for a popular local magazine, *Zan-e Rouz* (Today's Woman). As the Islamic Revolution solidified its power and began to establish its rule, Sherkat became increasingly dissatisfied with the conservative manner in which women were viewed by those in power⁶³. As a state-sponsored publication, the magazine was supposed to portray women as homemakers and much of the approved material revolved around cookery and needlework⁶⁴. Sherkat, however, pushed the magazine to become more feminist by introducing political and religious material which included women's unpaid care work and participation in public life. She describes her years as editor of *Zan-i Ruz* as a decade of enthusiasm, pain, and turmoil, one in which "our efforts were directed toward breaking down *Jahili* (literally meaning ignorant - an Islamic designation of pre-Islamic world) traditions and lighting flame in the dark tunnels of stagnation and reification⁶⁵." These efforts were not appreciated by the Islamic regime and in 1987, Sherkat was summoned to court when she published a story about a girl who refused to cover her hair and was beaten by the police⁶⁶. Her refusal to stop publishing stories such as these brought her into conflict with the conservative leadership of the magazine, and she was fired after eight years with the publication⁶⁷.

Before she left, however, Sherkat got permission from the minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance to establish a new magazine, *Zanan*, meaning *Women* in Farsi. The monthly magazine, which was initially based in a small office in Iran, grew to become the most widely read and influential publication on women's issues in the country⁶⁸. *Zanan* covered topics that were not

⁶³ Naomi Sakr, *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-expression*, (London: Tauris, 2007), 30.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth" in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64.

⁶⁶ "Shahla Sherkat-2005 Courage In Journalism Award", *International Womens Media Foundation* (2005), <http://www.iwmf.org/blog/2005/10/14/shahla-sherkat-2005-courage-in-journalism-award/>.

⁶⁷ Naomi Sakr, *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-expression* (London: Tauris, 2007), 30.

⁶⁸ Ibid 31.

only considered taboo by Iranian society but which also made the Islamic regime extremely uncomfortable. These included topics such as prostitution, domestic abuse and maternal custody along with modern interpretations of the Quran⁶⁹. Despite its effort to remain moderate and unbiased, the publication provoked many reactions in Iran and there were many attacks on its offices by religious fundamentalists as well as the government.

Similar to Sherkat, Taleghani was an active supporter of the Islamic Revolution and led rallies against the Shah during the Revolution. Her loyalty to the revolutionary cause, and her family pedigree, won her a seat in the first Parliament of the Islamic Republic in 1979⁷⁰. In the same year, she established the Iranian Islamic Women's Institute, with the aim to improve women's status by organizing literacy classes, informing women of their rights, offering them free legal advice, and providing vocational training in order to increase their financial independence⁷¹. She explains that, "The idea of setting up a women's Islamic organization goes back to the time when I was imprisoned under the Shah. I understood then that women who belonged to the secular left were better organized and were even able to attract Muslim women. I was therefore convinced of the need for an organization to help women with legal and economic problems⁷²."

However, Taleghani soon noticed that the new regime's patriarchal discourse around women overlooked their contribution to the Revolution.⁷³ While the leaders of the Islamic Revolution had urged women to take come out of their homes to advance the Revolution, they

⁶⁹ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 121.

⁷⁰ Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, 110.

⁷¹ Eric Hooglund, *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 62.

⁷² Azadeh Kian and Ethan Rundell, "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?" *Critique Internationale* (31 March 2010), www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CRII_046_0045--islamic-feminism-in-iran-a-new-form-of-s.htm.

⁷³ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 85.

now wanted women to be confined between four walls and serve their role as homemakers⁷⁴.

Taleghani, however, believed that the key role played by women during the Revolution qualified them for a more influential social and political role in the new regime⁷⁵. Disappointed in the reality of the Islamic government, she famously said that “poverty and polygamy are the only things that poor women have obtained from the revolution⁷⁶.”

While her organization ran successfully, Azam Taleghani realized the need to challenge the religious discourse around women in order to bring meaningful change to Iranian society. Historically, Islamic laws have been a result of male-dominated interpretations of the Quran which have often marginalized women. Taleghani’s publication, *Payam-e Hajar*, was the first magazine in Iran that worked within the framework of Islam to raise questions about the necessity of re-interpreting Islamic laws that favored polygamy and unequal rights to inheritance⁷⁷. It is important to note that *Payam-e Hajar* was not a feminist publication in the Western sense - it promoted women as homemakers but still equal to men⁷⁸. In other words, it showed that each gender has its own role that only it can fulfill which is why both men and women are equally important. This equality is evidenced by the fact that the publication, under Taleghani’s leadership, pushed the notion of women’s political leadership in a nation in which patriarchy was institutionalized and boldly declared herself a candidate for president in the 1997 election.

With their individual approaches in mind, Sherkat and Taleghani embarked on a journey to expand the rights of women within the paradigm of Islam. In the following sections, we look

⁷⁴ Hooglund, *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*, 59-60.

⁷⁵ Ibid 85.

⁷⁶ Coleman, *Paradise beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East*, 90.

⁷⁷ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 117.

⁷⁸ Ibid 156.

at how both reconciled Islam and feminism, opened up the domain of interpretation to women, and expanded the influence of women in the political arena.

Islam and Feminism: Reconciliation

Islam and feminism have long been considered antithetical to each other. In its July 2007 issue, the *Economist* magazine printed an article about Iran titled the “Riddle Of Iran”⁷⁹. Even though the article itself was solely about Iran’s drive to develop nuclear weapons, the accompanying photo on its was of a sea of women in black chadors. This tendency to use images of veiled women to represent the backwardness of the Iranian state and symbolize Islam’s oppression of women is a common phenomenon in the West. According to Leila Ahmed, the idea that men “beyond the borders of the civilized West⁸⁰” oppressed women, was often used to assert the inherent superiority of the West and morally justify colonization. However, many scholars continue to believe that it is not possible to generate a feminist discourse within an Islamic paradigm because the underlying principles of equality are alien to Islam.

It is not surprising then that when the Islamic regime came to power in Iran, women became symbols of the anti-west movement and any association with the Western notion of feminism was considered as a betrayal to their Iranian and Islamic identity. This struggle of Iranian women to define their identity, under a regime that refused to grant them this freedom, led to a new form of discussion between Islam and feminism in the late 1980s and 1990s⁸¹.

Unlike the past where feminism was largely equated with the West and secularism, in this new

⁷⁹ "The Riddle of Iran." *The Economist*, July 21, 2007. <http://www.economist.com/node/9514293>.

⁸⁰Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania 2011), 151.

⁸¹Mir Hosseini. "Feminist Voices in Islam: Promise and Potential."

era, Iranian women began to articulate a discourse of gender equality and social justice grounded in the Quran and other religious texts⁸². These women, like Sherkat and Taleghani, were deeply religious and had actively supported the clerics during the Islamic Revolution. The Iranian anthropologist, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, explains that while women like Sherkat and Taleghani “had played a crucial role in silencing other women’s voices⁸³” during the Islamic Revolution, they soon “became disillusioned with the Islamic Republic's official discourse on women⁸⁴” and began to challenge the regime’s conservative vision for women. In this section, we will look at Sherkat and Taleghani’s perception of the link between Islam and feminism and how it should be seen in the modern world.

Sherkat, a devout Muslim, had supported the Islamic Revolution with the belief that it was only through Islam that we could achieve a society where men and women were equal contributors. While she acknowledged that the oppression of women did in fact exist in the Muslim world, she also believed that it had no basis in Islam⁸⁵. Islamic sources, she argues, have been misinterpreted by men over the centuries in order to support “superstitions” and “*jahilli* [literally meaning ignorant] traditions⁸⁶” along with a legal system that discriminated against women. These sources, according to Sherkat, can be interpreted to encourage gender equality and more rights for women⁸⁷. In other words, gender equality can be achieved without discarding Islam and it was her goal to “go back to the depths of history to uncover the grounds for social

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ziba Mir Hosseini, “Beyond ‘Islam’ vs ‘Feminism’.” *IDS Bulletin* (January 11, 2011) <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00202.x/abstract>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Hooglund, Eric. *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*, 65.

⁸⁶ Afsaneh Najmabadi cited in Haddad and Esposito, 64.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

beliefs, to find the beginnings of the painful discriminations between two genders⁸⁸” and “light a dark in the dark tunnels of stagnation and reification⁸⁹.”

Sherkat associates herself with “indigenous feminism⁹⁰”, one that would speak to the traditional cultural and religious practices of Iranian women. Mir-Hosseini explains that in the current political climate in Iran, the solution to the problems of Iranian women must be in articulated in a local rather than Western language⁹¹. In other words, one must accept the social, political and economic realities of Iran and work within these parameters to educate women about their rights and help them broaden their sphere of influence. Sherkat explains how indigenous feminism allows women impact change by giving an example of the issue of abortion:

At present, we may not be able to raise the issue of abortion in our society. But we could raise the issue of women’s rights to have control over their sexuality and fertility. This is a very important issue in a society where the traditional interpretation of the Islamic law gives a man the right to have sexual relations with his wife and decide when and how many children he may want to have, and the wife has to obey his wishes. Therefore, the demand for a woman to have control over her sexuality and fertility challenges the patriarchal rights of men within Sharia law⁹².

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Valentine M Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 220.

⁹¹ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism”, 644.

⁹² Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 220.

While Sherkat agrees with the spirit of feminism, she is reluctant to identify herself as a feminist because of the imperial connotations associated with the term and its political implications.⁹³ Like Sherkat, most Iranian feminists have long had to navigate between their loyalty to both Iran and Islam, on the one hand, and their aspiration for women's rights using the feminist discourse⁹⁴. Sherkat believes that being associated with any particular label weakens the movement for women rights as it causes divisions between groups where they should not exist. Sherkat says: "When I started Zanan...the word feminism was used as a swear word. I didn't want to become known as a defender of feminism, I just wanted to talk about it. Feminism is still a new phenomenon here: we need to use it to create unity, to encourage women to protest together against gender inequality. That's why I refuse to attach any adjective to the word, such as Islamic or secular. I haven't got much time for labels⁹⁵." Sherkat's attempt at balancing her Islamic and feminist identity is represented by the manner in which she carries her veil. She doesn't wear the floor-length *chador* mandated by the Islamic Republic, but a *maqna'h*⁹⁶ which only covers her head. This action, though trivial in nature, is representative of Sherkat's refusal to conform to Islamic regime's concept of women and her determination to resist their control.

Sherkat's determination to not associate herself with any one type of feminism is one the main reasons that *Zanan* has been able to develop a new form of cooperation between secular and Islamic feminists within Iran⁹⁷. Following the Islamic Revolution, most secular feminists were either repressed or exiled by the Islamic regime who refused to grant them access to

⁹³ Mir-Hosseini, "Beyond 'Islam' vs 'Feminism'", 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Wendy Kristianasen. "Islam's Women Fight for Their Rights." *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Apr. 2004) [kit.monediplo.com/spip.php?article3890](http://www.kit.monediplo.com/spip.php?article3890).

⁹⁶ Hamideh Sedghi. *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.263.

⁹⁷"Inside Iran: Interview with 'Zanan' Magazine's Editor, Shahla Sherkat" *Ashaeq Al-Awsat Asharq* (January 31, 2013) <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/inside-iran-interview-with-zanan-magazines-editor-shahla-sherkat>.

political power. With the lack of political power, one of the main reasons that these secular feminists remained relevant in Iran was through their writing. Sherkat invited secular feminists such as Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi to write about women's issues, particularly legal reforms, in *Zanan*⁹⁸. However, this relationship was not an easy one as many secular women were accused by their ideological companions of being sympathetic to the Islamic regime by supporting Islamic feminists⁹⁹. Yet secular women, like Kar and Ebadi, felt that while only an end to theocracy would bring about real change, they could work with the Islamic feminists to bring meaningful reforms in Iran¹⁰⁰. Kar explained that initially she was even reluctant to meet Sherkat quite wrongly believing that her own ideas could never resonate with a veiled religious woman¹⁰¹. However, her preconceived notions were immediately dispelled upon meeting Sherkat and Kar was convinced that *Zanan* had started a historic movement in Iran – one that would benefit women¹⁰². There is no doubt that secular feminists were put at ease by Sherkat's progressive views as she believes that: "Women's rights issues in Iran are so complicated that we must start from somewhere that we could agree with each other and work through until we arrive at areas of disagreement... Not to forget that beside secular women, we also have religious minorities and national minorities where the issue of feminism could mean different things for different women¹⁰³." By bringing together secular and Islamic feminists, Sherkat expanded her readership and consequentially the legal literacy and gender consciousness among women.

⁹⁸Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 218.

⁹⁹ Elahieh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran." *Feminist Review* 69, no. 1 (2001): 65, doi:10.1080/014177800110070111.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Mehrangiz Kar quoted in Jane H Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi, *Globalization, Religion and Gender* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 199.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 219.

The difference was bridged not only between Islamic and secular feminists, but also Western and Iranian feminism. For Sherkat, one form of feminism was not better than the other and she promoted this belief through *Zanan* when she showed underlying similarities between the Iranian women's movement and Western feminist movements¹⁰⁴. *Zanan*, for the first time, translated and printed classic feminist literature from the West and included writings and biographies along with photographs of non-Iranian and non-veiled Western women. For example, *Zanan* published a translation of an interview with Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist, who wrote *The Second Sex*¹⁰⁵. Unlike many religious women who dismiss Western feminism as alien and corrupt, Sherkat calls for a balanced appreciation of weaknesses and strengths of the Western feminism¹⁰⁶. She notes: “We must all tolerate and respect each other's convictions. Even if we don't share the same philosophy, the same beliefs and thinking, we can and should work together¹⁰⁷.” In one of *Zanan*'s issue, Sherkat printed a portrait of filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-E'temad with her hair only half-covered in a fashionable scarf while leaning on a camera along with poems of a prominent poet Forugh Forrokhzad – who was known for sexually-rich and strongly feminist poems¹⁰⁸. In this way, *Zanan* played a profound role in reducing the Iranian phobia about Western ideas and showing that women face similar problems across the globe.

Similar to Sherkat, Taleghani supported the Islamic Revolution believing that it would not only rid Iran of the tyrannical rule of the Shah but also give women their rightful place in society. What this rightful place entailed was never publicly discussed but most assumed that the

¹⁰⁴ Lynn Walter, *Women's Rights: A Global View* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 121.

¹⁰⁵ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 72.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid* 72.

¹⁰⁷ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 91.

¹⁰⁸ Haddad and Esposito, *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, 203.

issue would work out itself once the Revolution was over. It was not until after the Islamic Republic had been established that women like Taleghani realized that the regime's idea of gender was radically different than theirs and although the state called itself an Islamic Republic, its principles and laws were not really Islamic¹⁰⁹. Taleghani refused to conform to the secondary status attributed to women by the Islamic regime and questioned the conservative forces within the clerical establishment. For her, feminism became a movement whose objective was to end gender discrimination and to create equality of opportunity for men and women as found in Islam¹¹⁰. She explains: "Women have a common fate. It is historically and specifically true that marginalized groups including women have revolted against their oppression. The Qur'an approves of our movement. The problem is not Islam, the problem is men¹¹¹."

However, unlike Sherkat, Taleghani holds a more traditional view of women and their role in society. While Western feminism seeks to make women equal with men, the feminism propagated by Taleghani gives women unique roles in society and culture but does not make them inferior to men. In other words, for Taleghani, women's evolution and identity is different from men but the difference is necessary in order to maintain balance within society¹¹². "I believe the heterosexual family relationship is necessary for the continuation of a healthy society but I also believe that there should be equal relationship between men and women within this family relationship, especially that the role of mother in the family is very important."¹¹³ This belief that motherhood was important in order for society to function highlights Taleghani's larger thought process where social problems are prioritized over women's problems. She

¹⁰⁹ Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran," 52.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 63.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

admits: “I believe that in our country women’s problems are secondary to political ones. What our people need is a correct analysis. Women are part of the society, and when its problems are solved, women’s issues will be solved¹¹⁴.” While this may seem like a conservative opinion to many, in a regime dominated by dogmatic beliefs, this was indeed progressive.

While the Taleghani and Sherkat’s idea of feminism differed from one another, it was largely rooted in Islam. Both women believed that Islam, in its true essence, promoted gender equality and it was only the distorted version of it that was applied in Iran. It was important for feminism, as Sherkat highlights, to be translated in a local language that could be understood by most Iranian, men and women alike. Taking Western feminism and applying it to the Iranian context would only exacerbate the mistrust between the two spheres of thought. However, understanding the struggle of Western feminists and linking it with the struggles of Iranian women, as Sherkat did through *Zanan*, increased the chances of cooperation and progression. What Sherkat and Taleghani believed is that one does not need to get rid of Islam in order to secure rights for women - in fact, it is in Islam that one can find these rights.

Reinterpreting the Quran

The role of women in an Islamic society was one of the most controversial issues that emerged in the modern era as Islamic societies faced immense criticism for their treatment of women particularly the existence of social seclusion, the practice of polygamy, and legal discrimination. The response of most modern Islamic reformers was to acknowledge that the oppression of women did in fact exist in the Muslim world, but it had no basis in the Quran.

¹¹⁴Amy B Sajoo. *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 102.

Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010), one of the most influential secular scholar of Islamic studies, believes that discrimination against women was a result of selective interpretations of Quranic verses¹¹⁵. The Islamic jurists, according to Arkoun, used Quranic verses to provide legitimacy to traditional practices in order to maintain a patriarchal society¹¹⁶. In other words, many scholars like Arkoun, argued that the Quranic verses used to justify such practices had been misinterpreted in order to support a male-dominant society along with a legal system that discriminated against women. As evidence, they put forward the Quran as progressive text that historically improved the status of women¹¹⁷. Compared to the 7th century Arabia where female infanticide was common and women were given no inheritance rights, Quran, they argued emphasized the spiritual equality of all Muslims, specified a woman's right to inherit wealth, and set limits on the practice of polygamy¹¹⁸. Although there is no definite conclusion on whether Islam actually improved the status of women, most of the scholarship does indeed see many Quranic verses regarding women as progressive for the time¹¹⁹.

Like most modern scholars, Shahla Sherkat and Azam Taleghani saw the re-interpretation of the Quran as the starting point of change in regards to women's rights. Both advanced a modernist exegesis of the Quran, particularly the chapter on women (*Al-Nisa*), to arrive at a new concept of gender relations. While Taleghani engaged in the interpretation herself, Sherkat edited the works of other writers and published them in *Zanan*. Her views can be discerned by analyzing the works of these writers and through her interview. Both women focused more on considering the patriarchal culture that existed in the 7th century Arabia and its impact in shaping

¹¹⁵Mohammed Arkoun. "Rethinking Islam Today." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1049852>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 28.

¹¹⁷Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "The Qur'anic Concept of Justice." (2001), <https://them.polylog.org/3/fan-en.htm>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Oliver Leaman. *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006):696.

the long-term interpretations of the verses. As it would be difficult to address all issues regarding women mentioned in the Quran, we will focus here on two key issues: the question of gender equality and the practice of polygamy. We will consider verses that address each of these issues in the Quran and Sherkat and Taleghani's explanation of these issues in line with their view of the Quran.

Sherkat firmly believed that discriminatory laws against women could not possibly change without a reinterpretation of the Quran and she offered Islamic readings of gender equality and justice¹²⁰. The historian, Afsaneh Najmabadi, highlights that: "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 interpretation¹²¹." Among the inequalities Sherkat addressed are laws related to divorce, guardianship of children, women's ability to act as witness in the court of law and her role in the family. While there were many individuals and groups that worked to reinterpret Quranic verses in face of modernization, *Zanan* was unique in that it intended to use this strategy to bring about cultural change and social power for women¹²².

According to Sherkat, the Quran is open to interpretation and historically this interpretation has been dominated by male jurists who have advanced patriarchal readings and then translated them in to Islamic law¹²³. The restriction of Quranic interpretation to a few chosen clerics has led, she argues, absolutist vision of Islam and underplays the value of interpretation in the process. In one of her interviews, she emphasizes that stringent rules such as

¹²⁰ Interview with Sherkat, Tehran, 27 September 1994 cited in Azadeh Kian and Ethan Rundell. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?" *Critique Internationale* (March 31, 2010) http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CR11_046_0045--islamic-feminism-in-iran-a-new-form-of-s.htm.

¹²¹ Afsaneh Najmabadi in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* in Haddad and Esposito, 71.

¹²² Ibid 65.

¹²³ Judith Miller, *God Has Ninety-nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 445.

women should wear a *black* veil or should be restricted to the home are not mandated by the Quran but by the clerics who misinterpreted it¹²⁴. One of the most prominent legal scholar whose work was published by Sherkat for over a decade in *Zanan*, Hojatoleslam Sayyid Mohsen Saidzadeh, advance this view: “For 1,400 years, discriminatory interpretations of women have been produced; these aren’t religion, but interpretations of religion. I defend my position against those who say I am questioning religion, I do not question religion, only erroneous religious thoughts¹²⁵.” Since interpretations can vary from time and place, there is no one interpretation that is absolutely true and so women, Sherkat believed, who have historically been excluded from the realm of Islamic jurisprudence, can and should be able to reinterpret verses for themselves instead of appealing to male clerics.

For example, if one considers the issue of wife-beating in Iran one can see, Sherkat argues, that is largely a male interpretations of the word *Daraba*¹²⁶. *Daraba* is an Arabic term that is traditionally interpreted as beating – however, in one of its issues, *Zanan* argued that this is a mistranslation of the Quran’s Arabic and *Daraba* can also mean “resting, avoiding, walking, preventing, staying home¹²⁷.” The Quranic verse states: “ But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], *strike them*. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them.” Here we see that the term *Daraba* is translated as *strike*– but Sherkat argues that this is one of the many translations of the word that can be applied. The clerics forget that the verse emphasizes other measures first but conservative forces have ignored all progressive translation of the verse, and instead promoted

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, 253.

¹²⁶ Miller, *God Has Ninety-nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East*, 445.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

wife beating, which Sherkat deems as a pre-Islamic custom¹²⁸. Sherkat not only challenged this practice on a theological level but also advanced social changes through her journalism. She published an article in *Zanan* titled, “Sir, Have You Ever Beaten Your Wife?” which included interviews with women who were abused and men who abused them in order to acknowledge the presence of wife-beating in Iran and make it a topic of debate¹²⁹.

Sherkat also emphasizes that since the Quran is rooted in a historical certain context, it is also essential to look at it while keeping that particular context in mind¹³⁰. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that it is closely related, culturally and linguistically, to 7th century Arabia where it was revealed over a period of twenty years¹³¹. Thus, for example, when the Quran says that women should inherit half of that of men, we must consider the position of women in 7th century Arabia who at the time were not allowed to inherit at all. The Quranic text itself may say that women should inherit half of what men should but, but the core of its message points out to the progressiveness of the Quran. In this manner of thinking, Sherkat echoes the idea of a renowned Egyptian reformer, Abu Zayd, who wrote: “The position of women expressed in the Quran, in general is historically progressive. It could easily be reinterpreted according to what it reveals by its historical and contextual significance in order to unfold its implication and, therefore, to foster the basic principle of equality inherent in the concept of justice¹³².” Similarly, certain punishments today are considered Islamic, which if one looks historically, have no basis in Islam. For example, in the Quran it says, “As for the thief, both male and female, cut off their hand (Surah 5: 38)”. Traditionalists see chopping off the hands of thieves as

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: the Elusive Face of Iran*, 123.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Abu Zayd, "The Qur'anic Concept of Justice."

an Islamic punishment. However, if you take historically informed approach of Islam, you can understand that this form of punishment has no origins in Islam but is actually rooted in the pre-Islamic Arabian society. Since this punishment has no ground in Islam itself, and is rooted in the social and historical context of 7th century Arabia, if this punishment is abolished in a particular Islamic society today, it does not mean that the society itself is un-Islamic. According to Sherkat, if Quranic passages are not understood in the proper historical context, but are literally transferred to modern times, the message will be misunderstood¹³³.

So for Sherkat, several traditions should be considered limited to the 7th century and not applicable to modern societies and it is a profound mistake to consider the Quran as a book of laws because this would imply that the Sharia is binding for all Muslims and all times¹³⁴. The Quran provided solutions to social problems that existed in 7th century Arabia, but that does not mean that those solutions are valid today since the socio-historical context has shifted so drastically. Since Islam, she argued, made sense for “all people in all countries at all times¹³⁵,” the verses that were applicable then did not have to be applicable in today’s world. God’s words had to be reinterpreted, updated so that they were applicable to modern life. Iran, for example, permitted citizens to marry at puberty, which it defined as nine for girls and fifteen for boys. “But people died younger in the seventh century. Today these designations are inappropriate¹³⁶.” Sherkat strongly held the view that if a practice, such as polygamy, has detrimental effects on the society it should be outlawed. This is because the purpose of almost all verses in the Quran, according to Sherkat, is to establish justice and if the practice based on these verses becomes

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Miller, *God Has Ninety-nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East*, 445.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

unjust – it is time to abandon this practice. Justice in this sense refers to divine justice since all people are deemed equal in the eyes of God.

Another important aspect pertaining the rights of women in the Quran is their equality with men. There is no doubt that Quran emphasizes the spiritual equality of men and women and their responsibility to fulfill the religious duties of Islam. This spiritual equality is clearly mentioned in many verses such as: “The believing men and women are allies of one another. They advocate righteousness and forbid evil, they observe the Prayer and give the obligatory charity, and they obey God and His messenger. These will be showered by God's mercy. God is Almighty, Most Wise (Surah 9:71)” and “As for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they enter Paradise; without the slightest injustice (Surah 4:124).” What these verses show is that in the eyes of God, the authors argue, that men and women are created as equal and have the same duties towards Him. However, the Quran does ascribe different social roles to men and women, roles that often appear to discriminatory in the modern world such as the Quranic verse that casts men as “the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more strength than the other and because they support them from their means (Surah 4:34).”

Sherkat believes that the spiritual equality of men and women mentioned several times in the Quran is evidence that in God’s eyes there is no moral difference between the two genders¹³⁷. *Zanan* promotes that view that there is no distinction made regarding how men or women will be treated in the afterlife nor does God assign each gender different religious duties and it would be irrational to argue that the Quran advocates a principle of gender inequality when God clearly states the spiritual equality of all Muslims in the verse: “As for those who lead a righteous life,

¹³⁷ Vakil. *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 121.

male or female, while believing, they enter Paradise; without the slightest injustice (Surah 4:124).” Gender inequality as it exists today in Islamic societies has much more to do with the patriarchal context where historically women were financially dependent on men and did not have the opportunities to gain experience or develop their character and intellectual abilities¹³⁸. However, this does not apply to contemporary times where women are capable of being economically independent. Sherkat said: “The Qur’an has not banned women from becoming judges. This prohibition was initiated in the history of jurisprudence and in the opinions of the previous religious authorities, whose ideas on women probably were shaped by the examples of their own wives or female relatives whom they generalized to the entire female population¹³⁹.”

Like Sherkat, Taleghani also engaged in reinterpretations of the Quran in order to challenge long-standing traditions such as polygamy. Polygamy, in Islamic tradition, is the practice according to which one man may have several wives simultaneously. Like many other practices in Islamic tradition, it is known that polygamy was a pre-Islamic practice that continued in Islam¹⁴⁰. Prior to the 18th century, most Islamic scholarship considered polygamy as a practice that was allowed and there was hardly any discussion over its legitimacy in the Quran. However, in the modern era, polygamy has become a widely debated topic. Most scholarship refers to two Qur’anic verses that address polygamy: Surah 4:3 and Surah 4:129. The first verse is part of the passage that addresses the issue of orphans, where the Quran says:

Give orphans the property which belongs to them. Do not exchange their valuable for worthless things of cheat them of their possessions; for this would surely be a grievous sin.

If you fear that you will not act justly towards the orphans, marry such as seem good to

¹³⁸ Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, 315.

¹³⁹Roksana Bahramitash, *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 29.

¹⁴⁰Michael Cook, *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 307.

you, two, three four; but if you fear you will not be equitable, then only one, or what your right hands own; so it is likelier you will not be partial. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only or any-slave girl you may own. This will make it easier for you to avoid injustice (Surah 4:2).

The second verses addresses men:

“You are never able to be just and fair as between your wives, even if it your ardent desire; but do not turn away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave (as it were) hanging (in the air) (Surah 4:129).”

In traditional Islamic scholarship, this verse is interpreted as giving men the permission to have more than one wife as long as they are able to provide for their basic material needs.

Azam Taleghani was the first to publish an article in 1992 which challenged the legalization of polygamy and proposed a new interpretation of the Quranic verses. According to Taleghani, Islamic scholars have not considered the underlying historical and textual context of the verse, which shows that polygamy was a solution to a profound social problem that emerged in the 7th century¹⁴¹. The verse, she highlights, was revealed following the Battle of Uhud where the Muslims lost nearly ten percent of their army. The death of these male soldiers left behind many widows and orphans who, in the 7th century Arabia, were often turned into slaves and

¹⁴¹Azam Taleghani, “The need for reform of the laws on divorce, polygamy and the guardianship of children”, *Payam-e Hajar*, 10 September 1992 cited in Azadeh Kian and Ethan Rundell. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?" *Critique Internationale*. March 31, 2010. 28-29. http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CR11_046_0045--islamic-feminism-in-iran-a-new-form-of-s.htm.

denied their inheritance¹⁴². Hence, Taleghani argues, the Quranic verse was revealed and provided the early Muslims with a solution to the problem of orphans through the practice of polygamy, which allowed the male survivors to take up additional wives in order to provide physical and financial security for them¹⁴³. Taleghani says: “The analysis of the Quranic verse on polygamy shows that this right is recommended in some specific cases and exclusively in order to meet a social need in view of expanding social justice¹⁴⁴.”

In addition to addressing social needs, Taleghani argues, the Quranic verses pertaining to polygamy have also placed the condition of equality¹⁴⁵. Taleghani argues that the condition for polygamy is impartiality in the treatment of their wives yet the Quran recognized that it is impossible to treat all wives equally¹⁴⁶. When two verses - “But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry only one (Surah 4:2)” and “You are never able to be just and fair as between your wives, even if it is your ardent desire (Surah 4:129).” - are read together, one can see that polygamy is that prohibited in the Quran because a man cannot be equally just in his treatment of wives. Taleghani pointed to the fact that even the Prophet Muhammad was not able to practice this tenet of equality and so it would be unlikely for an average man to achieve this either. This contradiction, according to Taleghani, shows that the Quran discourages polygamy and a man should marry only one wife.

Polygamy, Taleghani argues, does not hold in the modern world because unlike the 7th century, there exists a modern state system with social institutions to assist all families. In other words, while polygamy was applicable and had good effects in the early Muslim community, in

¹⁴² Bahramitash, *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, 28.

¹⁴³ Taleghani in Kian and Rundell 28-29.

¹⁴⁴ Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin, "Women, Religion and Culture in Iran." (Google Books. 2002), 133.

¹⁴⁵ Taleghani in Kian and Rundell 28-29.

¹⁴⁶ Bahramitash, *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, 28.

modern society, polygamy leads to more problems¹⁴⁷. Citing a national census of the population, she points on to the fact that there are more men today than women in Iran and polygamy along with high costs of marriage essentially deprive other men of marriage¹⁴⁸. The author concludes, “It has been shown that in reality it is pleasure rather than charity that motivates men to become polygamous¹⁴⁹”. Taleghani strongly held since polygamy increased social problem rather than solve them, it was no longer applicable in today’s world.

Although both Sherkat and Taleghani differed in their approach, both their interpretations on the verses regarding women recognize that the Quran inherently advocates for the principle of gender equality. Both Sherkat and Taleghani put forward the common belief that the Quran with regards to women provided a great step forward from the 7th century Arabian society where Arabs lived in ignorance and barbarism. In my view, what appears to be true is that the Quran did prescribe some improvements for women and some limitations. Improvements were not revolutionary and a majority were reforms of previously existing practices such as polygamy and inheritance laws. However, a clear Quranic reform was seen in various aspects such as the outlawing of female infanticide and dowry. What Sherkat and Taleghani’s analysis shows us is that if understood in their socio-historical and thematic concepts, these Quranic verses can be used to support reform in modern Islamic societies. As mentioned, practices such as polygamy no longer have to be considered as a part of being a Muslim as it is shown that these concepts can be re-interpreted in modern times. Similarly, their analysis also shows that the principle of gender equality has roots in the Quran. What is just for one society is not just for another, so

¹⁴⁷ Ibid 28.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

while male guardianship was due to the economic subordination of women in 7th century Arabia, it is no longer valid.

Political Advancement of Women

During the Islamic Revolution, women came out of seclusion and onto the streets as a political force and Khomeini praised them as “the lion-hearted ones whose great efforts saved Islam from the captivity of the foreigners and who alongside men secured the victory of Islam¹⁵⁰.” Women led many of the protests against the Shah and organized grass-root movements that were essential in the success of the Revolution. This high level of participation, particularly in a religious revolution, not only increased their sense of power and self-confidence but also expanded their political consciousness as women began to discuss their potential social and political role in the future Islamic government.

However, once the Islamic regime was in power, women were largely sidelined from the political sphere in Iran. By law, there is no restriction on accessibility of Iranian women to high positions in the government. However, in reality, the patriarchal culture grounded in a particular understanding of Islam has made it increasingly difficult for women to access power. The ex-President of Iran famously called on Iranian women to home to their families and focus on their “primary” responsibility of raising children¹⁵¹.

For the first decade after the Revolution, there were only three female deputies out of two hundred and sixty-eight in the parliament. Female parliamentarians occupied 1.5% of the seats in

¹⁵⁰ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 303.

¹⁵¹ Tina Eftekhar, *The Birth of a Celestial Light: A Feminist Evaluation of an Iranian Spiritual Movement Inter-universal Mysticism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 120-121.

first three parliaments¹⁵². But their presence doubled to reach a total of 9 in the 1992 elections which was 3.3% of the seats¹⁵³, and is up to 17, roughly 6%, in the 2016 election¹⁵⁴. Although women's presence in parliament and other decision-making bodies has been limited, women like Sherkat and Taleghani have refused to remain accept this secondary status and have found new ways to increase women's influence in the political sphere. In this section, we will look at the role that Sherkat and Taleghani have played in expanding the Islamic movement politically.

While Sherkat engages in theoretical debates of women's rights, she firmly believes that it is important to translate these ideas politically. She is not a political figure herself but has used her journal, *Zanan*, as an activist platform to influence political debates that center around women. Perhaps her most significant contribution in the political sphere was her campaign in support of the Presidential Candidate, Muhammad Khatami, during the 1997 Presidential elections in Iran¹⁵⁵. Unlike his opponent, Nateq Nuri, who ran on a conservative platform, Khatami appeared as a progressive candidate who understood that the clerical leadership must evolve with the social and political realities of Iran in order to remain politically relevant¹⁵⁶. This involvement included a progressive view towards women's rights: "We should have a comprehensive view of the role of women and before anything else, should not regard women as second-class citizens¹⁵⁷." Khatami understood the power and importance of the female vote and consciously appealed to them with his relatively flexible version of Islam. He found immense

¹⁵²Heshmat Sadat Moinifar. "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity." *GEMC Journal: School of Law, Tohoku University* 4th (2011): 28 http://www.law.tohoku.ac.jp/gcoe/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/gemc_04_cate2_41.pdf.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ "Iran Elections: Rouhani Notes Record 6% Women Elected." *BBC News* (May 01, 2016) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36182796>.

¹⁵⁵Hossein Shahidi, *Journalism in Iran from Mission to Profession* (London: Routledge), 2010.

¹⁵⁶ Hooglund, *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*, 57.

¹⁵⁷ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 147.

support amongst young who sought more social freedom and believed it would be easier to fight for women's issues under his presidency¹⁵⁸.

Determined to support his reformist vision, Sherkat printed an in-depth interview with Khatami and put him on the cover of *Zanan* when he was still considered a conservative candidate. In the interview with Sherkat, Khatami recognized that women's issues were controlled by a "male chauvinist attitude¹⁵⁹" and that it was important to increase their presence in the in political, social and religious forums in order to eliminate the male supremacy. In addition to revealing his goals regarding women, he also revealed details about his relationship with his wife and daughters¹⁶⁰. It is important to understand that in Iran women and daughters are not spoken about in public by men as they represent a private aspect of life. Hence's Khatami's interview, led by Sherkat's questions, made him appear more personable and gender conscious than he may have actually been and mobilized the female voters so much so that they became the largest single element responsible for his victory. Sherkat admitted the magazine's activist role in political affairs: "I keep careful track of all the unfair things legislators say about women. And then, when they run for office, I publish all the quotes alongside their pictures so women will know not to vote for them.¹⁶¹". Through Khatami's victory, Iranian women voiced their rejection of the discriminatory policies and practices of the conservative elite.

Whether Khatami's election had a positive impact on women's rights, as had been expected by Sherkat, is debatable. During his tenure as President, thirteen reform-minded women were elected as members of the Sixth *Majlis*, the Iranian term for Parliament, and formed a

¹⁵⁸ Hooglund, *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*, 56.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Vakil, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*, 147.

¹⁶¹ Ida Lichter, *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression* (Prometheus Books, 2009), 194.

legislative bloc that came to be referred to as the Women's Faction¹⁶². The goal of the Women's Faction was to amend discriminatory legislation and they did manage to make a few reforms. Firstly, the Women's Faction proposed a bill that would allow single women to study abroad and allow them to apply for government grants to support their education¹⁶³. This bill had been rejected by the last two *Majlis* ', however, since this *Majlis* was relatively more reform-minded than its predecessors - the bill was passed in 2000. In addition to this, the Women's faction was also able to increase custody rights for women. Since the Revolution, women were granted custody rights over females till they were seven years old and males until they were two, at which point full custody rights devolved to the father. The changes made to this law allowed the women to have custody over both male and female children until the age of seven. Although this change was not incremental, it still managed to push the boundary a step further. Lastly, the Women's Faction was able to raise the minimum legal age for girls to marry from nine to thirteen¹⁶⁴. *Zanan* supported these women by publishing articles about the measures they were working to pass while at the same time criticizing conservative women in the *Majlis* who continued to support the traditionalists.

As Shahla Sherkat, and her fellow reformers learned, however, this era of reform under Khatami was inconsistent and relatively limited in the changes it brought forth. Although reformist parliamentarians dominated the *Majlis* during the reform era, the conservative-dominated Guardian Council, which is charged with approving all legislation to ensure compatibility with Iran's Constitution and Islamic principles, used its veto power to block reform efforts within the *Majlis*¹⁶⁵. One of the key example of this was the proposal for the state to ratify

¹⁶²Shahram Akbarzadeh. *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam* (Routledge, 2011), 158.

¹⁶³ Ibid 158.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid 158.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

CEDAW. Although the *Majlis* collectively voted in favor of ratifying CEDAW, the Guardian Council refused to take up the issue deeming it was un-Islamic. The Guardian Council justified their rejection of CEDAW by arguing that while in Islam women and men are equal in the eyes of God, they have different social roles and duties¹⁶⁶. In other words, while women are spiritually equal to men, they are not charged with the same level of social, economic, and political responsibility, and thus cannot be given power in these spheres. The CEDAW's notion of equality in all spheres of life, according to the Guardian Council, was at odds with Islam. It is important to note that the Women's Faction did not present the case for CEDAW in secular terms but rather stressed its compatibility with Islam by invoking Islamic ideals such as egalitarianism and humanitarianism¹⁶⁷. The Guardian Council's refusal to seriously consider CEDAW represented the unwillingness of conservative clerics to accept legislation that might shake the misogynistic foundations of the Islamic state.

While Sherkat was politically active through her journalism, Taleghani fought directly for her share of power in the Islamic regime. In the Presidential Election of 1997, Taleghani boldly nominated herself as a candidate for Presidency. According to Article 115 of the Iranian Constitution of 1979, "The president must be elected from among religious and political personalities possessing the following qualifications: Iranian origin; Iranian nationality; administrative capacity and resourcefulness; a good past record; trustworthiness and piety; and convinced belief in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official madhhab (religion) of the country¹⁶⁸." The article uses the term *rejal*, which essentially means

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Arzoo Osanloo. *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 189.

¹⁶⁸ Inc., Manou & Associates. Iranian Government Constitution, English Text. <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/government/constitution-9-1.html>.

political personalities in Persian.¹⁶⁹ However, the traditional understanding of this term considers political personalities to be male and hence the rule has been that only a male could run for president of Iran¹⁷⁰. This understanding of this term went unchallenged for almost two decades until Azam Taleghani announced her intention to be a candidate for this position.

In debating the Council's decision against women's right to participate in political life, Taleghani argued that the term *rejal* is applied to both men and women in the Quran. She explains that: "Article 115 has listed several qualifications for the president, one of them is being a political personality...But that does not mean men only¹⁷¹." Taleghani argued that since women hold other public offices, they are also considered to be political personalities and cannot be barred from being candidates for the presidency. Taleghani also made her case in religious terms and highlighted that "there are sentences in the Quran that explain the basis of political activity by women. Islam never wanted to imprison women. On the contrary, it says women should be able to act and feel responsibility in order to raise children... but since the Government has always been in the hands of men, they never wanted to inform women about that¹⁷²." Her argument in Islamic terms and her clerical family background provided her with a level of legitimacy that few other women could have achieved at that time. While she was an insider, a supporter of the Revolution, who not only wore a black chador and spoke in Islamic terms, she also believed that it was essential to have female representation in key departments where national policies were decided. This view resonated with Sherkat who also supported

¹⁶⁹Tara Povey and Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 122.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid 122.

¹⁷¹ "Prominent Political Activist Continues Fight for Gender Equality in Iran's 2017 Presidential Election." *Center for Human Rights in Iran* (18 Apr. 2017), www.iranhumanrights.org/2017/04/prominent-political-activist-continues-fight-for-gender-equality-in-irans-2017-presidential-election/.

¹⁷² "Women in Iran Chafe at Role since the Revolution"

Taleghani's candidacy by publishing articles on the Islamic right and obligation of women along with interviews of Taleghani in *Zanan*.

In the end, the Guardian Council rejected her candidacy and refused to provide a written explanation for her disqualification by arguing that it is against religious law and might threaten national security. However, it was quite clear that the Council did not approve of Taleghani's candidacy due to its discrimination against women. Even after her disqualification, Taleghani continued her struggle and visited several religious seminaries in Iran in order to ask respected male clerics for their interpretation of the word *rejal*¹⁷³. She eventually got several clerics to support her position that a woman could indeed be president of Iran: "Some of the clerics said that women absolutely could not become President...but one ayatollah said that men and women, and, I'm sorry, even hermaphrodites could become President¹⁷⁴". She highlighted the contradictory clerical views on this matter in her journal, *Payam-e Hajar*, and showed that there was no consensus among the religious elite on whether a woman could or could not run for president. This lack of collective opinion, Taleghani asserted, meant that there was space for debate and she was determined to bring this debate into the public sphere pressure on Iran's political and religious elites to make changes¹⁷⁵. "I was told I wasn't a religious or political personality and that why I couldn't run for President," she said. "But it was a victory. I was not disqualified because I was a woman. That proves that a woman can run for President¹⁷⁶. It is likely that Taleghani knew that the Guardian Council would reject her candidacy but she considered it her religious duty to question the status quo and carve a path for other women to

¹⁷³ Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: the Elusive Face of Iran*, 112.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 112.

¹⁷⁵ Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin. *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance*. (New York: Freedom House, 2010), 144.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 113.

follow¹⁷⁷. Indeed, following her example, other women participated in presidential campaigns and in elections for ministerial posts and regional governorships. In the 2001 presidential election, forty-seven women registered as candidates and in 2005, the number had soared up to a hundred¹⁷⁸.

The Guardian Council, shortly before the 2009 Presidential Election, finally declared that the term *rejal* was gender neutral and that women were not banned from submitting their nomination. The spokesman for the Council of Guardians, Abass-Ali Kadkhodayi, said in a press conference that the “council has never interpreted the term *political rejal*..... In the past female candidates registered to run for president as there is no specific limitation on the matter... The Council of Guardians has never arrived at its position based on an individual’s gender, and whenever a woman was not qualified (to become a presidential candidate) it was because she lacked the necessary qualifications¹⁷⁹.” Here we see that while the Guardian Council admitted that there was no legal hindrance for female candidates, women were just not qualified enough to be considered suitable for the post of Presidency¹⁸⁰. It has been eight years since this statement was made and to this day, the Guardian Council continues to reject all female candidates. However, the fact that they found it necessary to clarify the term highlights the level of Taleghani’s influence and the impact the women’s movement had in Iran. Mona Tajali writes: “the Council of Guardian’s eventual clarification of this contentious term demonstrates the extent of women’s strategic efforts and pressuring on state elites, as well as some of the pressuring and

¹⁷⁷ Tara Poveu, *Social Movements in Egypt and Iran* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 77.

¹⁷⁸ Kelly and Breslin. *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance*, 144.

¹⁷⁹ Abass-Ali Kadkhodayi quoted in Mona Tajali. "Notions of Female Authority in Modern Shi'i Thought." MDPI. September 22, 2011. <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/2/3/449>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid 457.

negotiations that occurred between the religious women's groups and various reformist clerical figures¹⁸¹.”

The religious and political elites could no longer ignore the voices of women, like Taleghani and Sherkat, who strategically put pressure on them to reform Islamic legislation regarding women. Both Sherkat and Taleghani made sure that despite the effort of the ruling regime, women remained relevant in the political sphere. While Sherkat did this by ensuring that Presidential candidates understood the importance of catering to the female voters, Taleghani directly proclaimed herself as a nominee for President against the wishes of the Islamic regime. Together, they kept the political arena opened for Iranian women at a time when women were expected to be confined to the household.

Conclusion

“Faced by an apparent choice between the devil of those who want to impose patriarchal interpretations of Islam’s sacred texts, and the deep blue sea of those who pursue a neo-colonialist hegemonic global project in the name of enlightenment and feminism, those of us committed to achieving justice for women and a just world have no other option than to bring Islamic and feminist perspectives together. Otherwise, Muslim women’s quest for equality will remain hostage to different political forces and tendencies, as it was in the twentieth century and continues to be in the new century that began with the politics of the ‘War on Terror.’”

- Mir-Hosseini

We have, in the limited scope of this thesis, touched on key issues that are prominent in Islamic feminism. There are three key lessons to take from this thesis.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

First, it highlights, how some of the strongest critics of Islamic orthodoxy exist within the Muslim community themselves. Sherkat and Taleghani, wearing their veils, may portray the image of conservative supporters, but they have not only shown a profound understanding of the challenges Islam faces in the modern world but have also dared to radically reinterpret the Quran in face of the long-standing orthodox interpretation. Although both Sherkat and Taleghani came from different background and used different means to promote their cause, they played a crucial role in placing Quran in the world, in effect, advancing the Islamic feminist movement.

Zanan's success as major voice for reform in Iran is largely credited to Sherkat's leadership and her ability to navigate through sensitive topics while also bridging the gap between women of diverse backgrounds. "Doing journalism in countries like ours—where...the system thinks if you say anything it's going to fall apart—it's like being a trapeze artist." *Zanan* is evidence of the fact that bringing gender debate and women's issues to the forefront, engaging in theological reinterpretations, and opening up to global feminism can raise awareness and eventually bring about long-term change. Sherkat has used journalism not only to raise awareness amongst its readership on key social and legal issues but also to influence the political sphere by mobilizing women to support progressive candidates and legislations.

Taleghani, similarly, is a prime example of a woman who has single-handedly advanced the right's of woman as a political activist. By declaring herself as a Presidential Candidate not once but several times, she has exhibited resilience and a firm belief that Muslim women can and should be present in high positions in the government. The Islamic regime has been forced to respond to her struggles and while women candidate continue to be rejected, their rejection, at least officially, is not based on gender.

Secondly, the extent to which Sherkat and Taleghani were persecuted for their views sheds light on the power of the traditional elites within Iran and their general intolerance towards new views on Islam. As Sherkat's readership grew in Iran, she began to receive letters from conservative men who are opposing the reforms, accusing them of destabilizing family relationships. She responded: "Our aim is not to destabilize families and family relationship. Our aim is to bring about equality between women and men. If men are oppressive in a variety of ways, that does not mean that women must be silent against different forms of oppression¹⁸²." Although she was warned several times for promoting content that "compromised the mental health of its readers by providing morally questionable information¹⁸³" she continued to publish work on the women's issues and discriminatory laws. *Zanan*'s public presence and increasing number of followers became a threat to Islamic state and, in 2009, after 16 years and 152 issues, *Zanan* was shut down forever. Sherkat says it best: "the coldness of those seeking redemption did not cool off our enthusiasm, the cynicism of the times did not dull our pain, and the threats did not incline out turmoil to submission and abjectness. Our present independence is the sweet fruit of those days¹⁸⁴."

Like Sherkat, Taleghani faced several obstacles due to her political activism. When she reached out to foreign networks in order to raise funds and support her journal, *Payam-e Hajar*, her employees were interrogated and harassed and her own passport was confiscated¹⁸⁵.

Taleghani was also placed under constant surveillance by government agents and has been prohibited from going abroad on numerous occasions¹⁸⁶. "I won't be silent. And even if I remain

¹⁸² Elaheh Rostami Povey, "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran." *Feminist Review*, no. 69 (2010): 72, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1395629.

¹⁸³ Ida Lichter, *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression* (Prometheus Books, 2009)

¹⁸⁴ Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth", 59.

¹⁸⁵ Chitra Raghavan, *Self-determination and Women's Rights in Muslim Societies*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012), 285.

¹⁸⁶ Roja Fazaeli, *Islamic Feminisms: Rights and Interpretations Across Generations in Iran* (Routledge, 2017), 67.

silent, the women won't be silent. Our movement will continue.¹⁸⁷ Both Sherkat and Taleghani's life serve as proof of the reluctance of the Islamic regime to new modes of thinking and the monopoly the traditional elites hold over the interpretation of Islamic texts.

The last and the most important lesson is that, as both these women show, the Quran can be used as a source of reformation in the Islamic societies. Both Sherkat and Taleghani show that while an orthodox version of Islam finds support for gender inequality in the Quran, it is the Quran that also mandates these concepts and practices as outdated for modern times. The biggest challenge facing modern Islamic societies is therefore to open up the Quran to a rigorous re-interpretation – an interpretation that would inevitably challenge the authority of classical Islamic jurisprudence. Without a reconstruction of the basic principles derived from the Quran, women are bound to find themselves incapable to thrive in the modern context.

¹⁸⁷Davar Ardalan, *My Name Is Iran A Memoir* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 249.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Print, 2011.
- Akbarzadeh, Shahram. *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam*. Routledge, 2011.
- Al-Awsat, Asharq. "Inside Iran: Interview with 'Zanan' Magazine's Editor, Shahla Sherkat." *ASHARQ AL-AWSAT English Archive*. January 31, 2013. <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/inside-iran-interview-with-zanan-magazines-editor-shahla-sherkat>.
- Ansari, Sarah, and Vanessa Martin. "Women, Religion and Culture in Iran." Google Books, 2002.
- Ardalan, Davar. *My Name Is Iran A Memoir*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007.
- Badran, Margot. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2011.
- Bahramitash, Roksana. *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Bucar, Elizabeth M. *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011.
- Coleman, Isobel. "Islamic Feminists Transforming Middle East." *NPR*, April 27, 2010. <https://www.npr.org/2010/04/27/126309699/islamic-feminists-transforming-middle-east>.
- Coleman, Isobel. *Paradise beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013.
- Cook, Michael. *The New Cambridge History of Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

- Dabashi, Hamid. *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008.
- Eftekhar, Tina. *The Birth of a Celestial Light: A Feminist Evaluation of an Iranian Spiritual Movement Inter-universal Mysticism*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
- Elmi, Zahra Mila. "Educational Attainment in Iran." Middle East Institute. January 2009. <http://www.mei.edu/content/educational-attainment-iran>.
- Esposito, John L. *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Fazaeli, Roja. *Islamic Feminisms: Rights and Interpretations Across Generations in Iran*. Routledge, 2017.
- Hamid, Abu Zayd Nasr, and Esther R. Nelson. *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam*. Westport (CT): Greenwood, 2004.
- Hamid, Abu Zayd Nasr. "The Qur'anic Concept of Justice." 2001. <https://them.polylog.org/3/fan-en.htm>.
- Hooglund, Eric. *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*. Syracuse (N.Y.): Syracuse University Press, 2007.
- Hosseini, Ziba Mir. "Feminist Voices in Islam: Promise and Potential." *OpenDemocracy*, November 2012. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/ziba-mir-hosseini/feminist-voices-in-islam-promise-and-potential>.
- Hosseini, Ziba Mir. "Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?" Middle East Research and Information Project, June 2006. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061606>.
- Howard, Jane Mary. *Inside Iran: Women's Lives*. Washington, D.C: Mage Publishers, 2002.
- Inc., Manou & Associates. Iranian Government Constitution, English Text. <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/government/constitution-9-1.html>.
- Interview with the Sherkat, Tehran, 27 September 1994 cited in Kian, Azadeh, and Ethan Rundell. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?" *Critique Internationale*. March 31, 2010. http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CR11_046_0045--islamic-feminism-in-iran-a-new-form-of-s.htm.
- "Iran Elections: Rouhani Notes Record 6% Women Elected." *BBC News*. May 01, 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36182796>.

- Isfahani, Djavad Salehi. "Are Iranian Women Overeducated?" *Brookings*. July 28, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/are-iranian-women-overeducated/>.
- Kar, M. in Bayes, Jane H., and Nayereh Tohidi. *Globalization, Religion and Gender*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Keddie, Nikki R. "Iranian Women's Status and Struggles Since 1979." *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (2007) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24357968>.
- Kelly, Sanja, and Julia Breslin. *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance*. New York: Freedom House, 2010.
- Kian, Azadeh, and Ethan Rundell. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?" *Critique Internationale*. March 31, 2010. http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CRII_046_0045--islamic-feminism-in-iran-a-new-form-of-s.htm.
- Kristianasen, Wendy. "Islam's Women Fight for Their Rights." *Le Monde Diplomatique*. April 2004. <http://kit.mondediplo.com/spip.php?article3890>.
- Leaman, Oliver. *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*. London: Routledge, 2006. 696.
- Lichter, Ida. *Muslim Women Reformers: Inspiring Voices against Oppression*. Prometheus Books, 2009.
- Moaveni, Azadeh. "Why Iran Is Targeting Nobel Winner Ebadi." *Time*. November 30, 2009. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1943400,00.html>.
- Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1992.
- Miller, Judith. *God Has Ninety-nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. "Beyond 'Islam' vs 'Feminism'." *IDS Bulletin*. January 11, 2011. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00202.x/abstract>.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism." *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629-45. doi:10.1086/508085.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba "Women in Search of Common Ground: Between Islamic and International Human Rights Law" in. Emon, Anver and Ellis, Mark, *Islamic Law and International Human Rights Law: Searching for Common Ground?* Oxford University Press, 2012.

- Moghadam, Valentine M. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.
- Moghissi, Haideh. *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. London: Zed Books, 2002.
- Moinifar, Heshmat Sadat. "Participation of Women in Iran's Polity." *GEMC Journal: School of Law, Tohoku University* 4th (2011): 24-35. http://www.law.tohoku.ac.jp/gcoe/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/gemc_04_cate2_41.pdf.
- Morewedge, Parvez. *The Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Vision of Islamic Philosophical Theology and Praxis of Global Peace*. Global Scholarly Publications, 2015.
- Mottahedeh, Roy. *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2000.
- Najmabadi, Afsaneh. "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth." In *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Osanloo, Arzoo. *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Ozyegin, Gul. *Gender and Sexuality in Muslim Cultures*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.
- Paidar, Parvin. *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-century Iran*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005.
- Povey, Elaheh Rostami. "Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran." *Feminist Review* 69, no. 1 (2001): 44-72. doi:10.1080/014177800110070111.
- Povey, Tara, and Elaheh Rostami-Povey. *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012.
- Povey, Tara. *Social Movements in Egypt and Iran*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- "Prominent Political Activist Continues Fight for Gender Equality in Iran's 2017 Presidential Election." Center for Human Rights in Iran. April 18, 2017. <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2017/04/prominent-political-activist-continues-fight-for-gender-equality-in-irans-2017-presidential-election/>.
- Raghavan, Chitra. *Self-determination and Women's Rights in Muslim Societies*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis Univ. Press, 2012.
- "The Riddle of Iran." *The Economist*. July 21, 2007. <http://www.economist.com/node/9514293>.

- Sajoo, Aryn B. *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
- Sakr, Naomi. *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-expression*. London: Tauris, 2007.
- Sciolino, Elaine. *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*. Free Press, 2005.
- Sedghi, Hamideh. *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Shahidi, Hossein. *Journalism in Iran from Mission to Profession*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- "Shahla Sherkat: 2005 Courage In Journalism Award." *International Womens Media Foundation*. 2005. <http://www.iwmf.org/blog/2005/10/14/shahla-sherkat-2005-courage-in-journalism-award/>.
- Shahzad Mojab, "Theorizing the Politics of "Islamic Femenism," *Femenist Review* 69 (Winter, 2001)
- Tajali, Mona. "Notions of Female Authority in Modern Shi'i Thought." MDPI. September 22, 2011. <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/2/3/449>.
- Taleghani, Azam "The need for reform of the laws on divorce, polygamy and the guardianship of children", *Payam-e Hajar*, 10 September 1992, pp. 28-29 cited in Kian, Azadeh, and Ethan Rundell. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?" *Critique Internationale*. March 31, 2010. http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CR11_046_0045--islamic-feminism-in-iran-a-new-form-of-s.htm.
- Thaler, David E., Alireza Nader, and Shahram Chubin. *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads an Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010.
- UN Human Development. *Human Development Report*. 2016. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2016-report/>.
Table 5: Gender Inequality Index.
- Vakil, Sanam. *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Walter, Lynn. *Women's Rights: A Global View*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.
- "Women in Iran Chafe at Role Since The Revolution" *New York Times*, March 28, 1981. <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/29/world/women-in-iran-chafe-at-role-since-the-revolution.html>

World Economic Forum. *The Global Gender Gap Report*. 2017.
<https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017>.