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The Strength of Women in the Iranian Revolution

Claudia Espinoza

Senior Division

Historical Paper

On June 18, 2009, a gruesome video of a woman shot on the streets of Tehran began circulating on Twitter, Facebook and other websites. Her name was Neda, the Farsi word for “the voice” or “the call.” Neda had become the symbol of the reaction of Iranian women to the reforms brought about by the 1979 Revolution.¹ In Houston, Texas on January 16, 2012, medical student Gelareh Bagherzadeh was shot while pulling into her driveway. The reason for her death is still unclear, but Bagherzadeh was an Iranian activist who participated in protests to promote women’s rights while criticizing the Iranian government. These deaths, and many others just like them, potentially are a reaction to Iranian women who demand reforms after the Iranian Revolution.²

Though many historians claim that reforms since the Revolution have enhanced the role of women, others emphasize that women’s rights remain strictly limited. According to Iranian law, women can only inherit half the shares that their brothers inherit from their parents, their court testimony is worth only half of a man’s, they must have their husband’s permission to leave the country and cannot check into hotels on their own.³ The 1979 Iranian Revolution reformed society into an Islamic theocracy which required women to conform to strict rules regarding dress, education, job opportunities, family life and access to public places.⁴ Since the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the internal struggle in Iran between reactionaries who

¹ Wright, Robin B., *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 2000, 151.

² Ng, Christina, “Iranian Student Activist shot to Death in Texas,” ABC News, 17 Jan. 2012.

³ Maher, Mina, E-mail correspondence interview, 16 Feb. 2012

⁴ Moghadam, Valentine, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Boulder: Lynne Reiner Publisher, 2003, 193.

want to continue the strict laws, and reformists, who believe that it is possible for Iran to be Islamic, democratic and modern continues.⁵

Revolution, 1979

The Iranian Revolution, otherwise known as the Islamic Revolution, was a reaction to the White Revolution undertaken by Mohammad Reza Shah beginning in the 1960s. Looking to countries such as Turkey, the Shah sought to modernize Iran through westernization and secularization. A key to the Shah's modernization plan were reforms aimed at transforming the role of women. According to Dr. Roksana Bahramitash, "Women were to be liberated and serve as cultural transmitters of Western values."⁶ Family law was modified in favor of women. The Shah encouraged non-veiled women by rewarding them with government jobs and positions in health care and education (though this was not as drastic as Turkish secular laws which forbid veiled women in government buildings and schools). Oil revenues financed the expansion of health and education. Many women, particularly urban upper and middle class women, attained university degrees and entered the labor force. The Shah also granted women the right to vote.⁷

The women who benefitted from the Shah's reforms were mainly from the middle and upper classes in the cities. The majority of women, who were poor or working class, had few benefits. In fact, the Shah's liberation of women was accompanied by secret police raids and political repression. Under the Shah it seemed as though the rich, who were westernized and

⁵ Hill, Richard, Lecture Notes for Sociology of Revolutions, University of Michigan, 2012.

⁶ Bahramitash, Roksana, "Revolution, Islamization and Women's Employment in Iran," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Winter/Spring, 2003 – Volume IX, Issue 2, 231.

⁷ Bahramitash 231.

secular, were getting richer, and the poor, who were traditional and religious, were getting poorer.⁸

During the 1960s, Iran experienced land reform, education reform, increased women's rights, and a more westernized appearance. The Islamic fundamentalists became angered by the Shah's attempt to modernize their country because they felt that Iran was losing its moral foundation. According to Dr. Richard Hill, a sociology professor at Michigan State University who specializes in studying revolutions, Islamic reformist groups launched a revolution against the Shah for four reasons. First, there was disillusionment with what they saw as a corrupt, ineffective government. Second, there was outrage over the extreme inequality between the rich and the poor. Third, there was a crisis in national identity stemming from forced modernization and westernization. Fourth, there was the belief that Islam offers an alternative way to rule society based upon the Sharia, law of Islam, interpreted from the Quran.

The Iranian Revolution led to many contradictions on the role of women. Even under the Shah, lower class women were often confined to their homes and could not go out, especially at night, without their husband's or father's permission. One of the Ayatollah Khomeini's first actions of the Revolution called for devoted Muslim women to take to the streets and rise up against the Shah. According to Dr. Bahramitash, this helped make the Iranian Revolution one of the most peaceful ones because "the presence of unarmed Muslim sisters at the front made it difficult for soldiers to shoot at the women, who on many occasions handed them flowers and asked them to join and stand for justice."⁹

⁸ Mir-Hosseini, Ziba, "The Conservative-Reformist Conflict over Women's Rights in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 16, No.1 (Fall 2002) 38.

⁹ Bahramitash 233.

When the Islamists came to power, they planned to send women back home to their traditional roles as mothers and wives. The reforms of the 1979 Revolution included reducing the marriageable age for girls to 13, closing day-care centers, requiring *hejab* (modest dress) in public for all women, barring women from some fields of study, prohibiting women from being judges and dismissing women who were already judges.¹⁰ Women were not permitted to wear cosmetics or perfume in public. Women's voices were banned from the radio and female singers were not allowed to appear on television. Only those foreign films in which actresses had hair coverings were allowed to be shown. The reforms were targeted against the Westernized modern middle class.¹¹

Some Iranian women welcomed the reforms which came out of the Iranian Revolution. According to the blog of Aisha, a young Iranian schoolgirl, there were women who agreed to wear the *hejab* because they wanted to "please the Creator and not the creation." She also mentioned that she wore it proudly, and not because she was forced to. She went on to state "We want to stop men from treating us like sex objects, as they have always done. We want them to ignore our appearance and to be attentive to our personalities and mind. We want them to take us seriously and treat us as equals and not just chase us around for our bodies and physical looks." On the other hand, there were certain women who did not like the new rule of having to cover themselves up entirely. For example, some wore makeup and showed pieces of their hair in public even though they knew that they could get arrested for it.¹²

¹⁰ Ramazani, Nesta, "Women in Iran: The Revolutionary Ebb and Flow," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer, 1993) 410.

¹¹ Moghadam 197.

¹² Bezik, Soleyman, "Life During and After the Iranian Revolution," Interview by Rene Arakelian, *Clark Humanities*, Web, 4 Feb 2012.

According to Stepan Ghermezian, an Iranian woman, the situation during the Islamic Revolution was frightening. She left to live in America for about two years and returned to her home country at the start of the revolution. Once the Shah went into exile and Khomeini rose to power, many Iranians believed that the government would change for the better, but it did not. Ghermezian believed that “after the revolution everything became much worse.” For example, Khomeini prohibited parties, loud music, western movies or films, limited alcohol to some Christian groups, and reduced women’s rights while increasing men’s rights.

Dr. Ali Akbar Mahdi, an Iranian-American sociology professor at Ohio Wesleyan University stated that the Iranian Revolution was “a revolution in which the majority of Iranians participated to change the government, from monarchy to a democratic republic.” Instead, Iran became a theocratic republic where the clerical group dominated “all aspects of citizens’ life.” Dr. Mahdi studied sociology in the university before the revolution occurred. Once the revolution began, he had to “deal with society being oppressed.” He mentioned that during the revolution, many people were arrested, thrown into jail, and even executed if they criticized the government. Therefore, he and over 3.5 million Iranians decided to leave Iran after the revolution.

Dr. Mahdi believes that the people that benefited the most from the revolutionary reforms were the religious people and the lower social class. The Iranians most harmed were the educated people raised with secular values and women. The highly educated people with secular values believed, “religious values belong to the private domain and should not become the basis of the laws governing public life.” Dr. Mahdi believes that women were negatively impacted by the revolution because they became severely oppressed and banned from many professions. If the women obeyed the law and dressed modestly; they were safe.

Reaction, 1979 – 1989

Nesta Ramazani said that two groups emerged after the Iranian Revolution: Pragmatists, who were also known as Reformers; and Hardliners, who were known as Reactionaries.¹³

One of the earliest revolutionary Hardliner reforms was to have public separation of the sexes. Women were required to wear a *chador* or black cloak in public; there were segregated schools, swimming pools, public transportation and parks. Couples walking together produced evidence that they were married or related. A woman could work outside of the home if her husband was ill, at war, dead or otherwise unable to support the family. The “Ideal Revolutionary Woman” was trained in tradition; limited to housewife and mother roles; deferred to fathers, husbands or brothers; and pious. To make certain the women would not tempt men, the Revolutionary Regime ordered women to cover all but their face and hands, segregate themselves in public places and be supervised by a morality police. Khomeini called the *chador*, “the flag of the revolution”.¹⁴

Some reforms were actually helpful to women. Motherhood and domesticity were valued, so women were given a three month maternity leave, 2 ½ hours leave per day for nursing mothers to feed their babies, and compulsory day-care centers at businesses.¹⁵

The law reforms of the Iranian Revolution were very expensive. This, coupled with the war fought with Iraq from 1980 – 1988, led to the emergence of a group of Reformist leaders. The Reformists wanted to keep Islamic morality, but understood economic and political issues

¹³ Ramazani 409.

¹⁴ Hill.

¹⁵ Ramazani 414.

required to reform social issues between women and men. They wanted to encourage domesticity, but also wanted women to vote and volunteer for military training. Women were needed to replace male skilled laborers because many men were fighting in the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁶

Reform, 1989 – present

Since the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, many reforms have been undertaken in Iran to enhance the status of women. Women's groups have formed in which women are challenging the "true" standing of women in Islam. Zahra Rahnavard and Tahereh Saffarzedeh are Iranian Muslim scholars who call for a reinterpretation of many current practices labeled as Islamic. Women's magazines have changed format from fashion and housekeeping to criticisms of social policies that limit women's activities.¹⁷

Linda Wuest, Executive Director of the Houston World Affairs Council, was able to visit Iran in 2010. She stated that her first impressions of Iran were that it was a "very young country with beautiful educated people." However, there is a "stressful unemployment rate" which is one of the reasons why the people in Iran are protesting. Over half of the Iranian population, including young people with university degrees, is unable to obtain good jobs. She even mentioned that "many people asked if she could help them come to America" out of their desperate need for a job. Wuest noticed that "women were always covered, had to enter through the back door of the buses while the men entered through the front, and had to ride different taxis." She said that the women "didn't seem to mind the scarves, but they did feel bad about their job opportunities not being as good as the men's."

¹⁶ Mir-Hosseini 40.

¹⁷ Ramazani 427.

One of the biggest reforms impacting women today in Iran has to do with veiling. In 1992, there were a series of attacks on women for improper veiling. This practice has become known as “bad hejabi.” The *chador*, which has to be held in place, is considered impractical by most women and is being replaced by *roopooshs*, Islamic tunics worn over pants. Women are beginning to wear brighter colors and lipstick. Iranian-American Mina Maher, who has visited Iran on numerous occasions since the Revolution, recalls initially covering all of her hair and meeting the length requirement of her overcoat to not encounter any problems. However, she is amazed that “Iran has gotten a little laid back on the dress code.” Many women now wear makeup, bright clothing, skin-tight overcoats, and do not have all of their hair covered without being scolded at by the authorities.

Recently, women in Tehran have begun to design trendier clothes while still meeting the requirements of the Islamic dress code. Even though they have to wear the *hejab* and *chador*, “underneath their *chadors*, they take care of their appearance.” The Iranian fashion designer, Hasti Pourmarz, stated that they “have to cover themselves, but [the hejabs or chadors] that cover [them] can be cute and trendy,” by using color and design. Only women can attend the fashion shows, and the only advertisement they can use is by word of mouth.¹⁸

Iranian-American Siba Shakib stated that many Iranians have fears but overcome them when the pressure gets too much. The young, which is 75% of the population, has no memory of the last revolution. Now, “they reach a point where they say enough is enough.” Shakib doesn’t believe that she could help by going back, but feels she is a bigger help by being a voice for Iran outside the country.

¹⁸ Ramazani 421.

A woman who has a strong reaction towards the revolution is Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer, lecturer, writer, judge, and activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, for her efforts for democracy and human rights. She is a strong woman who favors enlightenment and dialogue as way to solve conflicts, and has worked for the rights of women in her country, Iran, and far beyond its borders as well. Iranian authorities reacted by confiscating her Nobel Peace Prize medal. Ebadi knew that she would be arrested for her activist movements if she stayed in the country, so she went into exile in 2009. Ebadi stated, "The protests are growing day by day because thousands of people are unhappy with the poor conditions that the government placed them in such as the high unemployment rates, lack of security, strong censorship, the civil and political liberties that have been taken away, and the corruption." Despite the strong discontent of the people, Ebadi doesn't believe this could be the start of a second bloody revolution because the people are tired of violence after the 1979 Revolution and the Iraq War, so instead they are working towards reforms.¹⁹

When Shirin Ebadi was asked if she had a message to send to Muslim women during an interview, she answered, "Yes. Keep on fighting. Don't believe that you are meant to occupy a lower position in society. Get yourself an education! Do your best and compete in all areas of life. God created us all as equals. By fighting for equal status, we are doing what God wants us to do".²⁰

¹⁹ Nobel Peace Prize, "Shirin Ebadi Winner," Press Release, Nobel Prize Organization. 2003.

²⁰ Ebadi, Shirin and Azadeh Moaveni, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*, New York: Random House, 2006, 36.

Iranian Muslim women such as Shirin Ebadi, Neda, Gelareh Bagherzadeh, Zahra Rahnavaard and Tahereh Saffarzadeh are launching a new Iranian Revolution. They call this a Green Revolution because it is non-violent. These women see themselves in a leadership position in the Muslim world and are calling for a reform of many current practices labeled as Islamic. The reaction of the Iranian government has been mixed--some women have been allowed to freely express their views while others have been killed, denounced or censored. Iranian feminist Shahla Sherkat said, "These demands for reform will not stop and will carry on, that is why I feel that the future is bright".²¹

²¹ Moghadam 193.