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## Women in Higher Education in Iran: How the Islamic Revolution Contributed to an Increase in Female Enrollment

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## Introduction

In 1979, Iran underwent a drastic social and political change called the Islamic Revolution. When Ayatollah Khomeini rose to power amid sweeping popular dissent and disdain for the existing Western-oriented regime, Iran went from a secular nation to an Islamic republic. This change drastically shifted society and social practice. Many observers, particularly those from the West, lamented the abysmal state of rights and opportunities for Iranian women after the revolution. While it is indeed true that women in the Islamic Republic of Iran have often been deprived of their rights, this narrative lacks nuance and fails to consider the difficulties facing women before the revolution. Moreover, it does not account for the ways that the rights of Iranian women have improved since the Islamic Revolution, particularly in education. After the revolution, women began enrolling in higher education at unprecedented rates. This increase of women in higher education provides an effective lens for viewing the role of women in society. A careful examination of women in the Iranian system of higher education reveals complex religious, political, and cultural features that have at times both enabled and prevented women from achieving highly in the university setting. This paper will explore the participation of women in Iranian higher education from the revolution to today. In doing so, it will demonstrate the paradoxical relationship the Islamic Revolution has had with women's roles in the public realm and the direct way that Islamic ideals promoted during the revolution encouraged women to study. Ultimately, it will conclude that the Islamic Revolution helped facilitate a system where women could succeed in education; as more women became educated under this system, there was a general increase in women calling for reform of the discriminatory gender policies implemented after the revolution. Overall, this increase in women in higher education has contributed to the rise of Islamic feminism and an intrinsic movement of Iranian women pursuing advancement of their legal and social status.

## Review of Existing Research

The phenomena of increasing female enrollment in Iranian institutions of higher education since 1989 has been well-documented in existing research. Some researchers attribute this rise to Khomeini. His call for women to be active participants in the revolution was a mobilizing force that led to women's participation in the public sector through higher education.<sup>1</sup> Others posit that the

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<sup>1</sup> Amina Tawasil, "Towards the Ideal Revolutionary Shi'i Woman: The Howzevi (Seminararian), the Requisites of Marriage and Islamic Education in Iran," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 13 no. 1 (2015): 107.

government would rather have fewer women in higher education. Indeed, researchers such as Mitra K. Shavarini note the national debate on the establishment of quotas to reduce the number of women entering universities. Because women are passing the college entrance exam and, thus, entering universities at higher rates than men,<sup>2</sup> she argues that the government has begun to fear women. Despite the early encouragement for women to participate politically and obtain an education, Shavarini points out that the large number of educated women pose a threat to the existing patriarchy of Iranian society. However, despite the more recent push for a reduction of female university enrollees, Shavarini notes that the government does not use religious arguments; she asserts that this is because the religion of Islam cannot justify withholding education from women.<sup>3</sup>

Golfer Mehran's research, on the other hand, demonstrates a continued dominance of men in the highest levels of academia. Men drastically outnumber women in teaching positions at Iranian universities. Only eight percent of those occupying the highest ranking university teaching positions were female in the 2007-2008 academic year. There are similar gender gaps among those studying for the more elite doctoral and masters degrees.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, gender discrimination in Iran is a continuing problem for women. Rossana Bahramitash offers an in-depth view of women's economic role in Iran before and after the revolution. Her research shows that during the two decades following the Iranian Revolution, the growth of female employment has risen more than during the former Pahlavi regime. She argues this is a result of Islam breaking down barriers that hindered women's opportunities to participate in the public sector.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to note that even in this more optimistic research, indicators still show women working at much lower rates than men in Iran. Moreover, in their research Goli M. Rezai-Rashti and Valentine Moghadam point out the difficulty for Iranian women seeking employment. Through data and personal interviews the researchers demonstrate an economic, social, and legal system that favors men. This means that although women continue to perform well academically, they are consistently underrepresented in the labor market. This is due to a complicated mixture of a cultural history of patriarchy that leads to negative perceptions of

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<sup>2</sup> Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Feminisation of Iranian Higher education," *Review of Education* 51 no. 4 (2005): 331.

<sup>3</sup> Mitra K. Shavarini, "The Role of Higher Education in the Life of a Young Iranian Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29, no. 1 (2006): 43.

<sup>4</sup> Golnar Mehran, "Doing and Undoing Gender: Female Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *International Review of Education* 55 no. 5-6 (2009): 550-551.

<sup>5</sup> Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 16 no. 4 (2003): 565.

women seeking work outside the home, a conservative religious environment that tends to make men hesitant to work with marriageable women, and an already struggling economic system where there are fewer jobs than people ready to work. As a result, young women report experiencing high rates of open discrimination in the work place and difficulty finding professional placement.<sup>6</sup>

There is also a significant body of work that points out the importance of feminism, specifically the emergence Islamic feminism in Iranian universities and in the society as a whole. Islamic feminism is important in understanding women and their role in and access to higher education. Shavarini defines the term “Muslim feminism” as a branch within the larger body of feminist thought that seeks to improve the status of women, legally and socially, within the Muslim world. Muslim feminism identifies religion as one of the problems women must overcome, and it rejects the Western feminism that came alongside modernization as sexually exploitive and colonialist in nature.<sup>7</sup> Halper notes that the very fact that the government is Islamic in nature provides room for religious debate within the context of legal rights for women. As a result, Islamic feminists are able to reinterpret religious texts to support their advocacy for more legal rights.<sup>8</sup> Janet Afary further addresses this tendency in her book, adding that Islamic feminists focus on religious writers who reinterpret Shari’a law to favor women’s rights and lawyers who seek more egalitarian family laws.<sup>9</sup> Afary acknowledges that new interpretations of the Koran have been giving women a more public role since the start of the Revolution when Khomeini used religion as a call to action among women.<sup>10</sup> Amina Tawasil further examines conservative Islamic women who study in seminaries. These women also break down gender barriers by using and reinterpreting the Islamic texts to justify higher education and a more public role for women in Iran. These highly educated, religiously conservative women view Islam as a means, rather than an obstacle, to overcoming gender oppression.<sup>11</sup> The emergence of Islamic feminism is an extremely important feature in understanding the rise of women in universities. However, to fully appreciate the

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<sup>6</sup> Goli M. Rezai-Rashti and Valentine M. Moghadam, “Women and Higher Education in Iran: What Are the Implications for Employment and the ‘Marriage Market’?” *International Review of Education* 57 no. 3-4 (2011): 428-29, 433-35.

<sup>7</sup> Mitra K. Shavarini, “Feminsation of Iranian Higher Education,” 333.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Halper, “Authority, Modernity, and Gender-Relevant Legislation in Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hoogland, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 17-21.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 292-93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 318-19.

<sup>11</sup> Tawasil, “Towards the Ideal Revolutionary Shi’i Woman,” 102-05.

movement, it is useful to have a complete understanding of the religious and social climate into which it was born. For this reason, this paper will first discuss the various political developments since the Islamic Revolution before focusing on the Islamic feminist movement in more depth.

### **Gender and Politics on the Eve of the Revolution**

While researchers note the problematic Westernized narrative of the oppressed Muslim woman<sup>12</sup> and the perception among Westerners that the poor social and legal situation of Iranian women is inherent to the Islamic nature of the government,<sup>13</sup> it is important to note that the long tradition of patriarchy and the minimal involvement of women in the public sector in Iran predates the Islamic Revolution of 1979. For example, women were not given the right to vote until 1963, and criticism of women's suffrage was prominent not only among religious clerics but also members of the less-religious middle class. What's more even some progressives opposed women's suffrage.<sup>14</sup> Many critics point out the higher rates of female employment in industrialized nations than in majority Muslim nations.<sup>15</sup> However, an examination of Iranian history reveals a low rate of female employment during the modernization and Westernization movements of the secular Pahlavi regime. Although veiling for women was outlawed in 1936 by Reza Shah, this move was more a political symbol of a secular state than an effort to curtail the tradition of patriarchy in Iran.<sup>16</sup> In fact, patriarchal cultural tendencies continued throughout the 20th century. As Bahramitash notes, despite more legal freedom for women during this period, female employment did not begin to significantly increase until the 1960s,<sup>17</sup> coinciding with the White Revolution of Mohammad Reza Shah. Yet, although there was an increase in female employment under the modern government of the Shah, Bahramitash observes that this rise was less significant than the rise that occurred after the Islamic Revolution.<sup>18</sup> This indicates that there is not necessarily a relationship between an Islamic government and a decrease in the presence of women in the public sector as some have suggested. Moreover, it shows that the challenges

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<sup>12</sup> Minoo Moallem *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 159-61.

<sup>13</sup> Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism," 551.

<sup>14</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 194-195, 203.

<sup>15</sup> Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism," 552.

<sup>16</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism," 555.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 565

facing women in Iran are long-standing and not necessarily resulting from the implementation of an Islamic government.

Further, it is necessary to point out the huge rise in educated women since the Islamic Revolution. According to Shavarini, on the eve of the revolution female university enrollment was at its peak. However, she critiques the statistics for excluding women from rural areas or from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as minority women. Because the school system of the Pahlavi era was secular, many women (and men) from culturally and religious traditional families did not attend school.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Rezai-Rashti cites data showing an increase in literacy among women after the 1979 Revolution, with 35.5 % of all Iranian women (not just the socially elite) being literate in 1976 compared to 52.1% in 1986.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is evident that there was a significant problem in women's education and employment prior to the institution of an Islamic government in Iran.

The low status of women in Iran even during the era of modernization is unsurprising given the tradition of patriarchy existing in Persian culture. Jamsheed K. Choksy notes that during the Sasanian era of Iranian history, the period when Islam was being introduced to the region, the Muslim caliphs were typically relaxed in their enforcement of Muslim norms, and, as a result, many typically Iranian traditions and norms continued in Persian society. Under the Muslim Umayyad Dynasty that brought Islam to the region, the legal status of women did not change from the existing Persian norms; women, even Muslim women, continued to be treated as property—bought, sold, and exchanged.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is clear that patriarchal social structures were aspects of Iranian culture before the introduction of Islam. The perpetuation of this patriarchy into the 20th century, as evidenced by the generally unequal conditions for most women under the secular Pahlavi regime, is, therefore, unsurprising, nor should it be attributed solely to Islam.

### **Khomeini and the Era of Revolution**

After his rise to power in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini became one of the public figures with the most influence on women in Iran. Khomeini had a paradoxical influence on the presence of women at universities and, broadly speaking, in the public realm as a whole. On the one hand, the Islamic Revolution

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<sup>19</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 334.

<sup>20</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "Politics of Gender Segregation," 474.

<sup>21</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy "Women in Sasanian and Early Islamic Times," in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. Guity Nashat and Lois Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 58-61.

was largely dependent on the political activity of women. Khomeini called on women to militarize and come out in support of an Islamic government during the revolution, and afterward, he advocated for female education.<sup>22</sup> According to the conservative Shi'a religious community in Iran, women's education is a duty. Although the role of motherhood was heavily emphasized by the revolutionary regime, education was also necessary in order to raise strong Islamic children well-grounded in the Islamic sciences and Koranic texts.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, even as education was being emphasized for young women as an Islamic duty, the education system itself was drastically changing. New laws seeking to render the public arena completely Islamic severely limited women's ability to appear and express themselves in public. Veiling became mandatory for all women, and strict sex segregation was mandated in institutions of higher education.<sup>24</sup> In order to make them more 'Islamic,' the new regime closed universities from 1980 to 1983. During this time universities underwent a sweeping purification process known as the Cultural Revolution. Under the Cultural Revolution, the curriculum was examined and evaluated according to how well it maintained Islamic values. Faculty whose views were judged to be discordant with those of the regime were fired. Further, an ideological test was added to the admissions process in an effort to ensure the appropriate moral character of all university attendees. Prospective students took a written exam and underwent an investigation in which applicants' neighbors might be interviewed to determine suitability.<sup>25</sup> Although the universities did eventually reopen, they were no longer the institutions created under the Pahlavi regime. With many talented faculty gone, fewer and lower quality textbooks, and a redesigned curriculum, the universities after 1983 hardly resembled their former selves. Under the new system, women were barred from 78 fields of study due to "biological reasoning."<sup>26</sup> Most of the subjects from which women were banned were technical or in the engineering field.<sup>27</sup>

In many ways, the Cultural Revolution led to an overall decrease in academic quality. This is a development lamented by Azar Nafisi in her memoir of her time as a professor at Tehran University. Nafisi mentions the resulting low academic standards of the universities after many dissident faculty members were

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<sup>22</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "Politics of Gender Segregation," 472.

<sup>23</sup> Tawasil, "Towards the Ideal Revolutionary Shi'i Woman," 104.

<sup>24</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "Politics of Gender Segregation," 473-74.

<sup>25</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 334-35.

<sup>26</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "Politics of Gender Segregation," 473.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

fired and curriculum was censored and monitored.<sup>28</sup> This sentiment is echoed by Shavarini in her interviews with Iranian students. A young Iranian student expressed to Shavarini that her courses are “weak,”<sup>29</sup> complaining that her high school courses were more challenging. She also feels that she is forced to take too many courses not pertaining to her area of study (at least one Islamic course per term). Moreover, she feels that she does not have access to high quality textbooks. Shavarini notes that these concerns are not limited to a few students. She points to a systemic problem in Iranian universities of unqualified professors, outdated books and technology, and highly censored curriculum.<sup>30</sup> This problem began with Khomeini’s Cultural Revolution and persists in universities today.

As might be expected after such a drastic change, when the universities did reopen fewer female students enrolled than in the previous term. Yet, this decrease of women in higher education can be contrasted with an increase of women and girls in primary and secondary education. Rezai-Rashti argues that this increase in female education immediately following the Cultural Revolution was due to the moralizing of the public space. In other words, because the school system had become appropriately Islamic through gender segregation and the enforcement of morality standards in public spaces, traditional and religious families were now more comfortable sending their daughters to school.<sup>31</sup> This is an important consideration and a fitting explanation considering that by the 1985-86 academic year, female university enrollment was up to 30% compared to 28% during the 1974-75 academic year.<sup>32</sup> However, in the face of these modest gains, it would be remiss not to also mention the deprivation of rights many women encountered at the university. This period was characterized by executions with many professors either killed or imprisoned for holding ideas or beliefs were deemed a threat to the Islamic Republic. Khomeini’s government even executed Farrokhrū Parsa, the Minister of Education during the Pahlavi regime.<sup>33</sup> Further, intense discriminatory laws were enacted that presented women with significant challenges. The Family Protection Act of 1967 was supplanted by a new body of law based on Shari’a that severely limited women’s rights within the family. It is, thus, unsurprising that in 1986, the Iranian census indicated growing gender

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<sup>28</sup> Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House Trade, 2003): 32.

<sup>29</sup> Shavarini, “Role of Higher Education,” 49.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>31</sup> Rezai-Rashti, “Politics of Gender Segregation,” 474.

<sup>32</sup> Golnar Mehran, “The Creation of the New Muslim Women: Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran” *Convergence* 24 no. 4 (1991), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Shavarini, “Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education,” 335.

inequality.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while women began making modest gains in education soon after the revolution, violence and fear still pervaded the university culture.

### **The Rise of Women at the University**

Nonetheless, the 1990s signified a shift regarding women's involvement in education. Despite the low levels of women enrolling in tertiary education immediately following the Islamic Revolution, the numbers of women attending university rose at unprecedented levels during the 1990s. This period of increasing enrollment was also marked by the lifting of many of the restrictions on women implemented during the previous decade.<sup>35</sup> The complex interplay of increasing female enrollment in higher education and the lifting of legal restrictions on women will be explored in more detail in a later section. First, it is necessary to establish the changing trends and demographics on Iranian university campuses in order to more appropriately discuss this phenomenon.

It is vital to note that, simply because of the passage of time, many of the young women who were increasingly attending primary and secondary education during the 1980s were coming of university age in the 1990s, allowing more women to be qualified to apply for university admission. This author suggests that this fact alone may be largely responsible for the increase of women attending universities during this period. However, whether this can be attributed more to the natural aging of women or to other shifting social conditions is impossible to determine from currently available research. Nonetheless, Rezai-Rashti provides data showing a general increase of women in tertiary education in the late 1990's and early 2000's. In 1997, women comprise 37% of all university students, and by 2000, they form 45%. This number grows to 51% in 2005.<sup>36</sup> This is a remarkable reversal of the gender gap in less than ten years. Mehran examines the rates of women at the faculty level of universities during this period. While men still greatly outnumbered women in university teaching positions, women did gain ground between the 1998-99 and the 2007-08 academic years. Unfortunately, women made the largest gains as assistant lecturers, the lowest-ranking faculty position, while the gender gap at the highest level remained virtually unchanged.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding, it is not unreasonable to assume that change occurs more slowly at the highest levels of academia. The years of study that it takes to become a professor in an Iranian university greatly outnumber the years to become an

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<sup>34</sup> Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam "Women and Higher Education," 423-24.

<sup>35</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 335.

<sup>36</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "Politics of Gender Segregation," 477.

<sup>37</sup> Mehran, "Doing and Undoing Gender," 551.

assistant lecturer because doctoral degrees are necessary to become a professor while people holding masters degrees may be considered qualified for a position as an assistant lecturer.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it will be interesting to watch data emerging in coming years to determine if the gender gap will begin to close more rapidly as the large number of women enrolled in universities continue their studies and eventually achieve doctoral degrees and distinction in their fields or if social pressure to marry and have children will keep college-educated women from working in academia. One disquieting trend indicating that a gender gap may persist among faculty is that only 33% of those studying at the specialized doctoral level (the highest degree available) were women during the 2007-2008 academic year.<sup>39</sup> This continuation of the gender gap at the highest levels of academia is unsurprising. As Shavarini points out, there is a lack of accomplished female role models for young Iranian women. The only feminine ideal the women she interviewed were able to produce was Fatima, the daughter of the prophet and wife of Ali who is venerated for her role as mother and nurturer.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that there may remain significant cultural obstacles to overcome for women in universities.

In short, while the increase of women in higher education is a positive development, it alone has not resulted in a gender equal society. In the next section, this paper will discuss the ongoing challenges facing women despite their growing academic achievement as well as the neo-conservative reaction to the increase in women's education.

### **Continued Challenges and the Neo-Conservative Movement**

So far, this paper has focused primarily on the positive developments for women's education in Iran following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, any discussion of women's role in Iranian society would be incomplete without an examination of the persistent disadvantages women continue to face as well as the surge of conservatism that occurred as women began making greater gains in the public sector.

A conservative movement was certainly present during the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami beginning in 1997; however, the election of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency in 2005 marks a significant shift in Iranian public opinion. Whereas under the more lenient laws of the Khatami government women on university campuses flourished, the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Shavarini, "The Role of Higher Education," 50.

Ahmidenajad government made a decided effort to discourage women's presence in all areas of the public realm, including on university campuses. Much like Ayatollah Khomeini had done 30 years earlier, Ahmidenajad forced many reformist professors out of the education system. Moreover, women's high academic achievement at universities led to a national debate about the establishment of gender quotas. In Iran, there is a rigorous exam called the *kunkur* that determines college admissions. In 2002, 62% of those who passed this exam, thus winning eligibility to study at a university, were female. Shortly after the release of this information, the Iranian parliament instituted gender quotas in public universities. To support this position, they cited the fact that most college-educated women do not join the work force. Some viewed it, therefore, as a waste to spend so many resources educating young women who will not use their degree in service to society. Others worried that the gender imbalance would upset the social structure of the family and that too many educated women would lead to unhappy marriages.<sup>41</sup> The conservative government responded to this reversal of the gender gap by implementing a strict return to gender segregation. Not only were women banned from 77 fields of study at the university level, but men were also restricted from certain fields of study deemed to be feminine. The policy of gendering the higher education system was intended to limit women's educational options. The Iranian Minister of Science who was responsible for higher education under the Ahmadinejad government actively promoted this policy of sex segregation as well as the establishment of quotas.<sup>42</sup>

As might be expected, this resurgence of political oppression sparked strong political resistance, particularly from women's groups, but this sort of dissent was met with harsh punishment including arrest and imprisonment. Indeed, the Ahmadinejad government was so anxious to curtail political dissent and agitation regarding women's rights that it closed the popular feminist magazine, *Zanan*, in 2008.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, despite this seemingly staunch commitment to limiting women's higher education evidenced by the government's strict policy and its intense squelching of any opposition, in actuality many of these policies were never practically implemented. Iranian universities lacked the faculty and the resources to enforce gender segregation among all subjects. Universities that did follow the policy inevitably faced with considerable financial hardship. Consequently, the application of sex segregation and gender quotas in Iran was ineffective, and the policies were laid aside.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 331.

<sup>42</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "The Politics of Gender Segregation," 480.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

Even with the relaxing of gender segregation in universities, women continue to face many challenges with regards to their education and their prospects after receiving their degrees. Shavarini focuses her research on Iranian woman, particularly emphasizing the individual voice of young women. She conducts interviews and case studies in order to understand the women that make up the system. This method is particularly useful in examining the subtlety of the gender inequalities in Iranian education, what drives women to educational achievement, what they perceive to be their most significant challenges, and how they view their own roles within society.

For example, Shavarini suggests that one reason women pass the *kunkur* at such high rates is because, as high school students, they have no other outlets. Because most extra-curricular activities are not open to girls, they have more time to study and prepare for the exam.<sup>45</sup> Further, a theme repeated by many of her subjects is that education is one of the few ways that they can earn social value. Some subjects described the intense familial pressure to do well in school; among members of the community and within their extended families, girls who perform well on the *kunkur* and attend universities instantly receive an elevated social status.<sup>46</sup> Many women see their position in society as second-class and see education as the main means by which they may raise their social status.<sup>47</sup>

Another interesting way Iranian women use education to navigate a society where they have fewer legal and social rights than men is through the practice of *mehrieh*, a monetary gift for the bride negotiated in the marriage contract. Traditionally, women deferred the payment of *mehrieh* until the end of the marriage—either through death or divorce. However, the sum of the money is the property of the woman and may be collected at any time. Thus, the ability to negotiate a high *mehrieh* is a means by which a woman can increase her social power and ensure rights she is not afforded by law. Since the Revolution, the practice of *mehrieh* has become more popular among educated women.<sup>48</sup> This is unsurprising considering the repeal of the 1967 Family Protection Law which provided women considerable legal rights as well as the institution of a new body of law that drastically lowered women's legal and social standing.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the practice of *mehrieh* has become crucial for women to avoid the potential ill-effects of many of the discriminatory family laws. Education plays a key role in this practice. One woman reports how her brother used her doctoral degree as a

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<sup>45</sup> Shavarini, "Role of Higher Education," 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>47</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 342.

<sup>48</sup> Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam, "Women and Higher Education," 435.

<sup>49</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 277-280.

justification for the high *mehrieh* he requested for her marriage.<sup>50</sup> In this system, a university education becomes a bargaining tool, a way for a woman to raise her social value and obtain for herself a series of protections and rights within the marriage agreement otherwise unavailable to her.

A second useful factor of marriage for educated women is economic. Women consistently form extremely small proportions of the working population. Iran's poor economy and patriarchal cultural tendencies continue to bar women from the labor market. Shavarini notes the frustration of many of Iranian women seeking to find employment. For women who do manage to find work, promotion is often difficult because of social ideas of gender and authority.<sup>51</sup> Although Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam point out that women seem to chiefly view *mehrieh* not as a means of gaining economic power but as a means of securing or preventing divorce and other matters related to family law,<sup>52</sup> education may also serve to secure the economic future of women by allowing them to marry into a higher socio-economic class than the one from which they come. With few prospects for financial independence, many women see education as a means of finding a suitable partner who will be able to provide for a family, thus securing their financial futures.<sup>53</sup> In essence, in a society where women are given fewer rights and privileges and generally valued less than men, education becomes an invaluable tool for women to promote their own self-interests and increase their social standing, even if the ultimate end for many of these women is, in fact, marriage and domestic life.

### **Islamic Feminism**

Finally, this last section will examine the rise of Islamic feminism in Iran and its complex interplay with the university system. This section will draw on the trends and data reported in the previous sections as well as the cultural and historical information described above. Without an understanding of the issues and intricacies described in previous sections, it would be impossible to demonstrate how the rise in the number of educated young women, facilitated by the Islamic Revolution, aided the development of Islamic feminism in Iran. Further, Islamic feminists have been active in agitating for an increase in women's rights and roles in the public sector. Thus, Islamic feminism and female

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<sup>50</sup> Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam, "Women and Higher Education," 436.

<sup>51</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 342-44.

<sup>52</sup> Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam, "Women and Higher Education," 436.

<sup>53</sup> Shavarini, "Feminisation of Iranian Higher Education," 343-344.

higher education in Iran have formed a cyclical relationship where one influences and facilitates the other.

Mehran argues a similar cyclical phenomenon relating to the participation of women in Iranian society and their welfare according to the Women's Empowerment Framework (WEF) developed by Sara Longwe. Longwe's model describes a hierarchal system where increased welfare is the first level of equality followed by access, conscientisation, participation, and finally control. While this framework argues an upward, linear movement, Mehran argues that in the case of Iran, a cyclical relationship between the levels of *conscientisation* and *participation* is more useful in understanding women's roles in Iran following the Iranian revolution. Here, the term *conscientisation* is understood as the awareness that gender roles are cultural constructs that may be changed. Mehran contends that women actively participated in the Islamic Revolution. As a result, there was an increase in conscientisation. This increase in gender awareness in turn led to an increase in women's participation in the decision-making process, and so on.<sup>54</sup> In other words, an increase in participation leads to an increase in gender awareness. This author would slightly adapt this interpretation to explain the development of Islamic feminism and its role in higher education. After the revolution, women were able to participate in higher education at higher rates. This ability to be present in the public space coupled with the confidence and knowledge gained through education and achievement facilitated an increase in feminist thought, and the growing number of educated women supplied Iranian feminism with a broader audience. In the wake of the revolution, the promotion of religion within society and the concerted effort to create a uniquely Iranian society, this style of feminism developed distinct from Western feminist thought and consistent with Islamic and Iranian cultural values and experiences. The growing strength of Islamic feminism allowed it to assert itself more forcefully in society and advocate more effectively for an increase in women's legal and social rights. When this was successful, it allowed women more roles in society and more ability to attend university. This subsequently led to an increase in women participating in Islamic feminist thought, and the cycle repeated itself.

The emergence of Islamic feminism during the early revolutionary years is noted by Rezai-Rashti. These women challenged the discriminatory laws instituted by the new government and reinterpreted some of the religious texts in favor of more egalitarian applications. Rezai-Rashti notes the importance of Islamic feminists in promoting gender equality and challenging the government's discriminatory gender policies since the beginning of the revolution.<sup>55</sup> There were

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<sup>54</sup> Mehran, "Doing and Undoing Gender," 544-546.

<sup>55</sup> Rezai-Rashti "Politics of Gender Segregation," 474.

certainly secular and westernized women, particularly among university faculty, who opposed gender discrimination based on humanistic values. Nafisi poignantly describes her own frustrations with the restrictive society based on her experiences in pre-revolution Iran and America where she was educated.<sup>56</sup> However, it is important to note that Islamic feminism is a branch of feminist thought that is unique in that it is grounded in Islamic tradition and thought rather than Western feminist thought applied to an Islamic society. While Islamic feminists may come from varying religious backgrounds and beliefs as well as different levels of religiosity, the school of thought cannot be separated from Islamic tradition. Therefore, more relevant to our discussion are the female seminaries (called *howzevi*),<sup>57</sup> and the rise of women educated in and able to interpret the Koran.

Firstly, it is essential to note that not all female scholars of Islam are necessarily Islamic feminists. There are women that spend years studying the Koran but still apply the same patriarchal codes of wider society to their understandings. However, the fact that these seminaries exist and that women are allowed to experience these high levels of religious knowledge is essential to the development of Islamic feminism. A significant part of Islamic feminist scholarship focuses on reinterpreting Koranic texts in favor of more egalitarian gender policies. Many women go to seminaries in order to study the Islamic texts and body of law, some of whom apply Islamic feminist interpretations.<sup>58</sup> However, even the *howzevi* women who do not align themselves with Islamic feminist thought help to provide legitimacy to the position of Islamic feminist. By participating in religious scholarship, these women help to pave the way for other women to read and form their own interpretations of the Koran.

The religious focus of the movement appeals to religious women and men, providing a righteous alternative to the patriarchal practices prominent in society. Here, it is interesting to note Tawasil's research on women who study at seminaries, many under conservative religious leaders such as Ayatollah Khamanei and Ayatollah Larijani. Oftentimes, these women interpret their main roles in the traditional revolutionary sense as being mothers and Islamic militants. As a result, their primary duty remains marriage and raising Islamic children to be citizens of the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, Tawasil contends that many of these women manage their domestic duty in a manner that allows their own upward social mobility within the male-dominated power structures.<sup>59</sup> Although

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<sup>56</sup> Nafisi *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 164-171, 183-185.

<sup>57</sup> Tawasil, "Toward the Ideal Revolutionary Shi'i Woman," 100.

<sup>58</sup> Tawasil "Towards the Ideal Revolutionary Shi'i Woman," 100.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-03.

studying at a seminary does not automatically make a woman an Islamic feminist, the very fact that women are allowed to be jurists and study at seminaries legitimizes the rights of female religious scholars to interpret the Koran in accordance with Islamic feminist thought. Further, by participating in high levels of society, these women forge the path for other women to do the same.

Islamic feminism is an important development because it allows an outlet for religious women to advocate for their rights within their own religious communities. Prior to the revolution, secular women's organizations existed in order to promote women, but their secular orientation alienated many religious women. For example, the Woman's Organization of Iran (WOI) campaigned for women's rights in the pre-revolutionary era, even taking on religious issues such as honor killings. However, the lack of a religious orientation made the WOI unpopular among religious groups. Consequently, for many conservative religious people, feminism became associated with the secularism and modernism against which they struggled. Indeed, many of these policies that promoted women were mainly oriented toward urban, secular women, ultimately leaving behind the rural and religious women.<sup>60</sup>

In 1991, *Zanan*, Iran's most prominent women's publication, began publishing. It served as a mouthpiece for the growing coalition of women representing varying sects of society who sought to improve conditions for women in Iran. Indeed, *Zanan* was explicitly feminist and provided space for discussing many of the most crucial issues facing Iranian women as well as celebrating the achievements and joys of life as a woman.<sup>61</sup> The 2008 closing of the magazine demonstrates its efficacy and the perceived threat it held in the eyes of the politically and religiously conservative sectors of society. Nonetheless, the magazine reopened in 2014,<sup>62</sup> suggesting that there may once again be an increase in willingness to engage in feminist conversations, as found in the magazine which represents a platform for Islamic feminist thinkers to engage in ideological debate and discussion.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The role of women in Iranian society remains a divisive subject. This paper has examined the complexity of the issue through the lens of women's participation in higher education. The presence of women at universities in Iran is a promising proponent for the continued advancement of women in Iranian

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<sup>60</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 217-18.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 317-20.

<sup>62</sup> Rezai-Rashti, "Politics of Gender Segregation," 482.

society. The continuation of patriarchal norms, both those preserved in the society through religious practice and those resulting from the patriarchal culture predating the implementation of institutionalized Islam, are an ongoing challenge for women. While the paradoxical relationship of women's rights and the Islamic Revolution is an interesting study, it is important to remember the persistent challenges facing women. Education in Iran has served as a platform for women to advance themselves personally, but also broadens their scope of influence on society and allows for the development and advancement of Islamic feminist thought. This development of Islamic feminism has allowed for Iranian women to find ways to better their conditions within their society in ways that Western feminist practice during the Pahlavi era did not. The Islamic Revolutions played a significant role in facilitating women's ability to study at institutions of higher education, thus enabling an educated group of women to emerge in Islamic feminist thought, challenging the same discriminatory practices of the government that enabled their educational advancement. Overall, the continued education of women in Iran and the continued commitment of Islamic feminists to agitate for women's rights appears to be the most effective and practical solution for advancement of women in Iranian society while also allowing the emerging changes to reflect a cultural tradition unique to Iranian society.

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