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# Women, State and Ideology in Iran

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The Islamic ideology regards women with a mixture of fear and paternalism, and sees them both as the source of evil and as the most vulnerable member of the household, in need of constant surveillance and protection. The policies of the majority of muslim states are accordingly framed, often equating women with children and the insane.

Islam, which literally translated means total submission, is not merely a belief system, but also a way of life and muslims are expected to run their lives according to the Qoranic injunctions. In many respects the teachings of the Qoran are quite specific, for example muslims cannot disinherit their descendents (Ref. ), and even the exact proportions inherited by the spouse and children are stated in the relevant verse. There are, however, other poetic and ambiguous injunctions in the Qoran which are open to different interpretations, and much of the teachings concerning women fall in this latter category.

The Shiia sect of Islam as practiced in Iran interposes the Mojtabehin, religious leaders, between the Qoran and the people. The Mojtabehin, being wide and learned men, have the authority to explain the teachings of Islam to the Shiia muslims. So long as the clergy were in opposition in Iran, their role as intermediaries between the word of God and His followers enables them both to offer protection to those persecuted by secular law (Ref. HA), and to provide a degree of flexibility and bring the religious dictum into line with secular practices. At the same time as there was a tacit agreement between some leading clergies and the state, Iranian women were able to use this flexibility and obtain a degree of religious approval for the slow and difficult progress towards sexual equality. Thus, during the 80 years preceding the Islamic revolution, Iranian women fought for and gained access to education, (1910), the abolition of the veil (1936), the vote (1962), a curb on the unequivocal male right of divorce and the right to contest for the custody of children (1973), free abortion on demand (1974) and a ban on polygamy and right to maintenance after divorce (1976). Although equal opportunities were still a long way away, the Women's Movement had great expectations of success in the 1970s.

There were, however, divisions amongst women. The middle class and educated ones were both demanding and gaining access to the public sphere and seeking control over their own sexuality and the freedom to express it. The devout and less wealthy women equated sexual freedom with immorality, imperialism and corruption, and found the pecuniary rewards for their menial jobs insufficient; this in turn made access to paid work more of a loss than a gain for many women. The poorer ones felt that they had lost the honour and dignity bestowed on them by their religion without a gaining any material benefits in return (Ref. HA). As a result the advocates of domesticity for women found a large

support base among the poor and working classes both male and female. Khomeini, on his return in 1979, exploited this support and embarked on an intensive campaign to drive women back to the sphere of domesticity. Within months of his return women had been redefined as 'unequal' and 'impetuous' and biologically and naturally 'inferior'. Their mere presence in public was described as 'selicious' and they were forced to don the Islamic hejab, covering them from top to toe and return to the home fires.

### Legislation and Inequality

The conviction that women were naturally unwise and unequal has led to new legislations which exclude women from many legal rights, while making them equally subject to the harsh treatment of the current laws of retribution qassas.

Within months of his takeover, Khomeini dismissed all women judges and barred female students from attending law schools. Subsequently, he closed the Law Association, Kanouneh Vokala, and replaced secular courts by religious ones, often presided over by theological students with one or two years training (Ref. HA). The laws now implemented do not admit women's evidence and have allocated to women half the blood money, dayeh, given to men. Dayeh is blood money paid in cases of manslaughter by the murderer to the relatives of the murdered person (Dayeh law 20.4.61, article 1) in lieu of retribitional justice. If a man murders a woman he cannot be punished unless her relatives pay a dayeh to the murderer (Qassas law 18.6.61, article 6). Furthermore, a father who murders his children is 'excused' from punishment provided he pays dayeh to the inheritors (article 16 Qassas laws); but no specific dayeh is stipulated for children. Mothers, however, do not benefit from this right to life and death of their offspring.

Women's evidence is not accepted by Iranian courts, unless accompanied by that of a man. Women, who, nevertheless, insist on giving evidence without male corroboration are liable to punishment for slander (article 92 of Qassas laws). Even sexual intercourse between lesbians, which is punishable by death if it occurs more than four times, cannot be proven unless the women admit to it or the act is witnessed by four men (article 158). This refusal to accept women's evidence is a contradictory interpretation of the clear Qoranic statement which accepts women's evidence, but equates that of two women with the words of one man (Ref.).

The exclusion of women from the legal and public domain has been justified in the Iranian press through numerous interviews with leading religious figures. The arguments are entirely based on the 'God given' nature of women. Men have been given a status above women (2-228) and authority over them (4-34) by the Qoran. The Iranian clergy explain that this superiority is an inherent right of men who are endowed with a 'calm and orderly nature'. Their 'wisdom, judgement, integrity and foresightedness' enables men to 'control and curb the hiatus caused by the unruly passion of women' (Akhlaz, 28.7.84).

The 'natural' and 'biological' inferiority of women is described as a fundamental law governing all social and political activities. Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, the majlis (parliament) speaker, who is a leading clergy denounced the West for 'over reacting' to the feminist demands and creating total anomy as a result. In his view Western women have been 'forced to abandon their natural talents, as created by God and endorsed by men'. They have been pushed out of their 'natural and humane domestic environment' and 'propelled from school to offices and subjected to the harsh demands of factories and word places' and obliged to adopt shameless and dishonourable roles which go against their gentle and sensitive nature'. The unnatural 'displacement' of women has, according to Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, imposed the double burden of domestic and waged labour on the women, against their

better judgement. The result has been the failure of many to fulfil their holy duty of motherhood or, in some cases, even to deny this very instinct 'this has resulted in the birth of an unloved and uncared for generation who is lacking the fundamental basis of mother love and tenderness, and has become social misfit and disrupted Western societies'.

Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani is convinced that this enormous social cost has brought no benefit for women at all. "Despite all the efforts of the so-called liberated women ... Western women have never had any impact on the political or military destiny of their countries." It is a remarkably myopic world view which can so easily dismiss the impact of Victoria's imperialist rule, Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, Maria Threse, Joan of Arc, or Maggie Thatcher or Indira Gandhi, to name but a few. But the Majlis speaker expressed a deeply held view of the Iranian religious establishment when he qualified this statement by saying "Even in those countries where apparently women are in charge, we know that they are no more than the mouthpieces of their menfolk who control these women and dictate their every decision" (K 26.7.84).

## Employment

The dismantling of much of the modern sector of the economy and the resulting unemployment problem could be resolved to some extent by the exclusion of women from the public sphere. At the same time, Khomeini has been careful to retain the massive support of those women who both took to the streets and voted for him (Ref. HA). As a result, women have not been disenfranchised, nor have they been formally banned from the labour market. They are, however, discouraged from working in any area other than the traditionally female preserves of nursing and education. In particular, there has been a massive propaganda campaign to drive women out of office jobs.

Khomeini has compared women office workers to a destructive whirlwind and denounced them as painted dolls who 'displace and distract' men and bring 'saddition and degredation' to the workplace (K 14.3.83). In this, he is backed by some of the women he has brought to eminence. Thus, Mansureh Tayeb Zadeh Nouri, a member of the Central Council of Teachers, has declared that 'women should be thrown out of offices' to prevent them from corrupting the men.

In the early post-revolutionary days, there were a few women who dared to criticise the regime publicly for its draconian measures against women. Tehran Majlis deputy, Maryan Behrouzi, protested about women's right being trampled on by 'half-baked prejudices disguised as Islamic belief' (K3.2.82). As she correctly pointed out, not only were women 'squeezed out of the public sphere' but also two years after the formation of the revolutionary Majlis 'not a single law, nor even clause has been passed to ameliorate the position of women in this country'. All that had happened was 'an un-Islamic and distasteful treatment meted out to women civil servants' along with administrative instructions which 'undermine these women and the future of their jobs' (K 3.2.82).

These instructions included the order compelling all women to wear the Islamic hejab, the closure of all workplace nurseries and the forbidding of full-time work for all mothers of young children. Motherhood, however, though a prescribed duty, remained unpaid ; a situation which made it imperative for many mothers to seek paid work to secure their livelihood. The problem is so serious that the generally tame women's weekly, Zaneh Rouz, felt it necessary to publish an article stressing the plight of working mothers. All the women interviewed stated that they worked to

make ends meet. Many pointed out that their entire salary merely paid the rent. Women civil servants, who, like the men, had taken a pay cut when the Islamic regime came to power, highlighted the steady erosion in the benefits they receive. Despite paying 30 % of their income in tax and 7 % for medical insurance, they received no tangible benefits. Government health schemes seemed incapable of providing any medical care or assisted childbirth facilities. Furthermore, married women civil servants had been deprived of food tokens, one of the few fringe benefits they had obtained before the revolution. (Because of food shortages and difficulties of shopping during working hours, civil servants had been granted food token which could be exchanged at special government-run-co-operatives). These women pay exactly the same taxes as their husbands and as the designated 'home managers' are expected to buy the food. However, the regime's view of women as the 'dependents' of husbands overrides all such considerations and allocate the scarce fringe benefits to the 'deserving' men.

## Education

The withdrawal of food token compelled many women civil servants to abandon the desk and join the food queue. Some of these women teachers and their decision to leave the profession had a contradictory effect on the governments' policy of sexual segregation of schools. The hasty measures introduced to woo women back to the classroom has met with an unintended resistance from husbands. Impressed by the barrage of propaganda about the shame and dishonour incurred by being a women civil servant, many husbands exercised their legal right to barr their wives from returning to work. The situation was aggravated by the governments' policy on domesticity which confined mothers of young children to the home fires.

In the country where only 15 % of women are literate and 5 % ever reached tertiary levels of education, it would always have been difficult to introduce segregated schooling without seriously damaging the future of education for women. Currently, of the total of 320,000 women civil servants, 180,000 are employed by the Ministry of Education. Of these, 120,000 work as primary school teachers, 20,000 are in secondary schools and the rest have administrative posts. The banning of male teachers from girls' schools has unavoidably resulted in an inferior 'bantu' education for women. The problem was grave enough for Zaneh Rouz to take the unusual step of criticising government policies in an editorial. "Is it right to expect childless women or those with only one child to give all their time and effort to their domestic chores?" "Why should society be denied the invaluable labour of women because of the unwillingness of their husbands... who place their personal comfort above that of a society and the requirements of our revolution?" (18.8.84).

The government, however, is intending to resolve this problem by barring women from studying subjects deemed suited to men only, a measure which is reminiscent of similar Nazi policies (see HA). Accordingly, women are not allowed admittance to scientific and most technological university faculties. In a country where women play an essential role in agricultural production and are central to the cultivation of rice, tea, cotton and other products, the only relevant subject deemed suitable by the regime for women to study at university levels is rural dialects, no doubt to allow women to work as interpreters for male agricultural extension workers.

Girl students have proved surprisingly resilient in the circumstances and the remnants of their pre-revolutionary

education is still reflected in their success in examinations. The Ministry of Education currently refuses to release any data giving the male/female breakdown of examination candidates. However, a survey conducted by Zaneh Rouz showed that 38 % of the successful candidates in the entrance examinations for the preparatory courses for university entrance (equivalent to S levels) were women. These included 49 % of entrants for experimental sciences, 48 % of those for social sciences and economics, 42 % of those in education and literature, 41 % of arts and only 8 % of those who passed in mathematics and physics. The latter reflects both totally inadequate teaching standards and the reluctance of women to join courses which have been declared unsuitable for them. The future of these women remains uncertain despite their current success. To retain their momentum they need to fight practical and ideological obstacles which makes their life prospects both uncertain and uninviting.

## Nurseries

One of the successful campaigns by women in Iran led to the legislation requiring the establishment of nurseries at all work places, rural as well as urban, employing 10 or more nursing mothers. Although this statutory obligation was frequently ignored by private firms, the public was under enormous pressure to fulfil its obligation and there were increasing numbers of government funded nurseries and day care centres catering not only for civil servants, but also for working class women living in slum areas. As early as 1967 some 15,000 children were using such government funded facilities. Each unit generally accommodated about 200 children and kept a number of emergency places vacant for mothers unexpectedly requiring short term child care (KI 13.6.73). In the poorer quarters of town the fees charged were minimal or non-existent and civil servants were entitled to subsidise nursery fees.

Unfortunately for Iranian working mothers, Khomeini regards nurseries as 'dens of corruption' and within five months of his return from exile, all government funded nurseries were closed. By 1984 most employed women could no longer afford to pay for child care. With nursery fees amounting to 50 % of average salaries, for many women the only alternative was God's vigilance to care for the children who 'spent the day playing in a nearby park' (25.8.84).

Given the policies of subordination of women no state agency is prepared to open government assisted child care facilities. Zaneh Rouz in a despondent editorial in the Summer of 1984 admitted that the men in charge of the state apparatus 'who should be wise and broad minded and able to appreciate the gravity of the problem' are of view that 'our sisters should abandon public ambitions and aspirations and concentrate on motherhood and domesticity' (Z 11.8.84). As far as the government is concerned, it is the sole responsibility of women to provide child care ; it is however permitted for these who have 'the material means' and the 'natural talents' to set up nurseries (K 26.7.84). But even private nurseries have not been allowed to work freely. In 1983 many were closed by the Improved Living Organisation Sazemaneh Behzisti and are to remain so pending the legislation of further regulations (K 22.2.84).

## Hejab

Iranian women have become the reluctant standard bearers of the public face of the Islamic regime. The republic's fragile honour can now be threatened by the mere appearance of women. National honour is now secured by women covering themselves

from top to toe at all times, except in the privacy of the husband's bedroom. Iranian women have been understandably reluctant to accept this heavy responsibility and have made several attempts to prevent the imposition of hejab. The first directive requiring women to don the veil was issued in March 1979, less than two months after Khomeini's return. There followed numerous protests and large-scale demonstrations by women, nevertheless, the regime has continued its official and unofficial harassment of those who refuse its decision to make them publicly invisible. Shops, restaurants, cinemas and all public places are instructed not to serve women who are not wearing the hejab and all government offices now have individuals responsible for checking that women are properly covered. The open defiance of hejab and appearance in public without it, is punishable by 74 lashes (article 102 of Tazizat, flogging code) and officials who apprehend such women do not need to take them to court 'since the crime is self-evident, the punishment will be immediate' (Moussavi Bojnourdi Z 18.8.84). The members of the God's party Hezbolahis usually fanatical government supporters, ensure that the regulations are enforced in the street. Women who are deemed inadequately covered are attacked by those men with knives or guns and are lucky to survive the experience. The Hezbolahis also indulge in frequent 'spontaneous' demonstrations protesting the 'shameless nakedness' of women who trample on the blood of young men who gave their lives to the revolution and died a martyr's death (Ref.).

Hejab has been identified by the regime as the very cornerstone of its revolution. It is described as 'basic to Islamic ideology' (Moussavi Bojnourdi (Z 18.8.84), and prescribed by God Himself as a 'duty for women (Ayatollah Mohmand Emani Kashani K 8.7.84). The many muslims abroad who appear unaware of this godly duty are denounced by the regime's representatives as ignorants. Mrs Gohar Dastqei who attended an educational conference in Cuba reported proudly "I was the only woman there with an Islamic appearance. Of course, there were sisters from Malaysia, Pakistan and Egypt, but their appearance showed quite clearly that they were not at all familiar with Islams' (27.7.84). Dastqei remained convinced that Iranians alone had a clear understanding of God's will despite her travels to other Islamic countries. She stated placidly that the Burmese 'though familiar with the Qoran, have not realised that it stipulates the hejab for women'. It must be noted that the relevant verses in the Qoran require women to 'cover their adornments' (2431) and instruct women who are related to the prophet 'to draw their veils close around them' (3359). Few Iranian women can claim to be descendants of Mohmand, the rest do not conceive their arms and legs to be 'adornments'.

The Iranian clergy, however, have determined that women must cover everything except for the round of the face and the two hands. This shrouding of the body is supposed to bestow respect and dignity on women. It is said to denote 'deliverance from the yoke of imperialism' and represent 'a symbol of liberation, and resistance to capitalism, and revolutionary aspirations'. (K 23.7.84). Thus, women who refuse to don the hejab and 'flout their naked bodies in the streets' are denounced as 'corrupt, seditious, dangerous and destructive of public honour and chastity'. (K 14.3.83). These 'wayward women' are said to be instrumental in all foreign inspired plot to undermine the revolutionary puritanism. The voice of the clergy calls on the national to oppose this internal enemy 'with the same vigour as we oppose other terrorists who have sought to sabotage our revolution' (Z 18.8.84). As early as June 1979 women were bearing the brunt of the revolutionary chastity and being executed for endangering it by acts described as 'seditious, corrupt' or 'prostitution' ; it is important to note that these attributes are granted so freely to women but not to their male accomplices.

Behind the rhetories of honour and sedition there lies a deep

conviction, not of the vulnerability of women, as publicly stated, but of the fragility of men. It is because men are thought to be eminently susceptible to 'female lures' that the regime insists on making women invisible. This conviction about men's weakness makes it imperative for women to wear the hejab in order to 'eradicate' both adultery and sodomy' (Z).

The stated assumption of the regime is that the only fundamental threat to male sanity and rationality are anger and sexual arousals; the latter incurred exclusively by women. The mere presence of women is said to undermine men's better judgement. It is not only a woman's body, but also her face, her movement, the tone of her voice and even the colour of her garments which can arouse the menfolk (Z 11.8.84 and 18.8.84). Women can be so easily dangerous, and are so feared, that Tehran University has felt obliged to instruct its female members not to talk nor walk 'in a speaking manner'.

The imposition of hejab is hailed as a timely check imposed on 'loose women', apparently to 'check their dishonourable ways' and 'shield their honour' (Z 18.8.84). But in reality this 'trench of modesty' is imposed, not to protect women, but to prevent the endangered male species from total annihilation at the mere sight of women.

## Marriage

Men's sexual weakness can become a tower of strength within the institution of marriage as defined by the Iranian clergy. Marriage is seen as a desirable institution which enables fathers to transfer the control of their alluring daughters to strong husbands. This process is said to prevent both 'corruption' and to stave off all threats to 'revolutionary morality'. Husbands will be able to 'curb' the women's irrational tendency to 'appear naked in public and make themselves conspicuous by using artificial make-up' (Z 18.8.84, Cf HA). So important is this institution in securing public morality that men are encouraged to marry more than one wife allegedly 'to protect young women from moral degradation', but more probably in order to protect men from the ever impending threats of 'loose women'.

## Advice Columns

A review of the advice column of the weekly women's magazine Zaneh Rouz, highlights the emphasis on marriage as the best solution for many if not all problems experienced by young women. In the Summer of 1984 Zaneh Rouz replies to 180 letters. Usually, this magazine publishes only response and the letters; the content of these is a matter of conjecture. Of the letters that received an answer, 12 % were from male readers, 30 % of them were advised to get married. Of the women's letters, 28 % were told to get married as soon as possible and a further 16 % were advised to obey their parents and act according to their guidance. In this context the actions seemed to range from the desire to marry without parental approval to refusal to marry a chosen suitor, to more general criticism of parents' behaviour. In all these cases they were advised to do their duty and respect their parents' wishes. 11 % of the women were told firmly not to embark on pre-marital acquaintances and to cut off any such relationship that may have existed; there is an interestingly Victorian tone when the dangers of exchanging letters with men are enumerated. It is the considered opinion of the advice columnist that young men are disgusted by women who are prepared to talk to them before getting married, 'they lose their respect and abhor such advances from women'. 8 % of the women are admonished for appearing too keen and seeming to initiate marital proposals; they are told

that it is the men who should seek and the women who must wait decorously to be asked. It is interesting to note that in one of the issues carrying this message, Zaneh Rouz also published an article about Mohamad's first wife Khadijeh. Khadijeh decided that Mohamad would make a suitable husband and sent her uncle to ask for his hand, Mohamad refused saying that she was wealthy and he was poor and it would not be a suitable match. Khadijeh persisted and sent for him a second time, then he agreed to marry her. Apparently although women are encouraged to idolise the Prophet and his family, in this instance they are not to emulate them. As to married women, Zaneh Rouz advice columnist was of the view that they should never seek divorce. Here the tone was both conciliatory 'it is the duty of women to gain the love and affection of their husband' and 'the best solution is to live with and accept your husband' and 'try to love your husband and forget these useless ideas'; or grave 'women are bereft without their husband and children and would have nothing else left to live for'. 6 % of the correspondents were warned against serious misdeeds 'this is a major sin and will result in weakness, thinning of the blood, loss of weight and nervousity. Stop immediately and avoid solitude'. 4 % were told to stop day dreaming and continue with their studies and a further 4 % were advised to turn to God and religion for guidance.

Of all the responses only one advised the women to initiate proceedings to divorce her impotent husband 'get a doctor to examine him and issue a certificate'. And four were advised against marriage, one because 'marriage with a non-muslim is not permitted', two on the grounds of the men's impecuniosity and one because the suitor was 'corrupt and seditious'. The rest of the replies included three telling readers that suicide was a major sin, two explaining that polygamy may be unjust and even strictly speaking unethical, but it was legally permitted and there was nothing that that first wife could do about it; and two telling women to have baby to cement marriage.

## The law, ideology and marriage

Islamic marriage can be, at its best, a flexible contract between two consenting adults. Women are required to stipulate a consumption price mahre, which they are entitled to receive at marriage and before sleeping with the groom, though usually this is paid to women on divorce. Although in an unequal relationship, married women can expect to be kept in the style to which they have been accustomed and they can demand to be paid fees for suckling their babies. When marriage breaks down, divorce is a matter of repeating the correct formula three times before witnesses. Although men have the unequivocal right of divorce, women can obtain the right by stipulating it in the marriage contract. Divorced men and women can freely re-marry, but women who have not reached the menopause must wait for up to three months between each marriage.

Iranian women had fought successfully to curb much of the power that marriage bestowed on men and had even gained the reciprocal right, already enjoyed by men, to prevent their spouse from accepting a job which 'dishonoured' the family (FLP 1976). Minimum age of marriage for girls was raised to 18, polygamy banned and divorce and custody made subject to the decision of the family courts. Furthermore, over and above the mahre mothers who gained custody of their children on divorce were entitled to maintenance payment.

In its haste to re-establish male supremacy in public and private spheres, and protect 'the adolescent from immorality' the Iranian regime revoked all these measures before the first Majlis elections. By October 1979 men could have four permanent and innumerable temporary wives, and were given the exclusive right to divorce at will (the only exceptions were women whose

marriage contracts stipulated that they had the right to initiate divorce proceedings). Fathers and parental ancestors also regained the unquestioned right of custody, sons at the age of two and daughters at seven. The age of marriage came down to 13 for girls and husbands regained the authority to barr their women from getting paid employment.

Women too old for the schoolroom, however, are not easily dissuaded from their latterly gained feminist convictions and the regime has launched an extensive media campaign to persuade this group to embark on marriage. The press, for years the mouthpiece of government in Iran - though more so now that the Ministry of Ideology has the formal right to exercise 'guidance' - has made a curious intellectual turnabout. In 1972 the Iranian papers were publishing articles which depicted marriage as a positively dangerous occupation for young women. The director of the Tehran School of Social Work, Satarea Farmanfarmayan was quoted as saying that 70 % of suicides in Tehran were by women aged between 18 to 25 who were in the first years of their marriage (KI 10.6.72). Hardly a desirable fate for prospective brides. By contrast, in 1984 the unmarried are equated with terrorists. Ayatollah Mousavi Bouroujerdi, a leading member of the high council of the judiciary, claims that most of our political prisoners are unmarried. 'Freedom from marital responsibilities has made these young people vulnerable to false ideas and led them to murder and treason'.

The regime's appropriation of marriage is backed by long running series of articles endorsing marriage and denouncing those who refuse to participate. As an indication of the success of its propaganda campaign, Zaneh Rouz published a letter from an 'old' spinster. A 28-year-old professional woman had written a long and anguished letter stating that she was educated, gainfully employed and ideologically 'pure and committed' yet no man had asked her to marry her. 'Where is my wasted youth?' she is quoted as saying. 'What is left for me in this life? I have saved my purest and most beautiful moments for a man to spend them with him and have his child. Yet the men prefer to marry pretty young girls and leave me to suffer the unbearable longing for motherhood and to shed my tears in solitude. I am the casualty of the men's obsession with beauty and fear of intelligence and intellectual women' (Z. 11.8.84). Iranian women who struggled against the oppressive institution of marriage and regarded it as a final downfall, find it hard to accept that such a fundamental change could occur in the mentality of women in such a short time, particularly since the prescribed marriage is far from a partnership between equals. Zaneh Rouz' response to this letter included the stern admonishment that 'too much education has made you too highbrow, that is why 13 years after the proper age of marriage you are still single' (18.8.84).

Nevertheless, the combination of propaganda and the bleak reality of the oppressive public sphere, may in the end push young girls to accept the prevalent ideology of domesticity.

Early marriages are advocated for both men and women. A religious pundit writing on marriage in Zaneh Rouz claims that the Prophet Mohamad has compared girls to ripe fruit 'if the fruit is not picked it will spoil and the wind will make it fall. So when girls reach the point of womanhood the only thing for them is a husband; otherwise, they will be unprotected and will fall in the unavoidable and dangerous pitfalls which threaten all human beings'.

A series on Ethics of Marriage written by Hojatollah Abasqoly Akhtari, a well-known cleric, and published by Zaneh Rouz called on the young to embark on marriage regardless of their economic situation and told them that though very difficult at first 'it will all work out for the best' (14.7.84). The articles described marriage as a religious duty which cures almost all social and personal

problems. 'Marriage improves the psychology and physiology of their spouses and makes them physically and socially healthier' and those who marry accomplish two-thirds of their religious duties and gain comfort and solace' (Z 14.7.84).

## Sexuality

The 'comfort' gained through marriage is that of the husband and 'solace' is also his. Marriage is there to satisfy male sexual urges. Wives are there to quench the 'ever blazing fire of lust' and placate the 'obsession' with 'sexual urges' which renders the youth 'desperate' and overrides all the dignity and better judgement. Ardour is the preserve of men, women are merely required to 'give themselves unquestioningly to their husband' and 'obey their every command' (18.8.84 Z).

But there is a major problem for 'obedient' women; the stated ideology of the regime prescribes total innocence, chastity and modesty for young girls who are expected to cover themselves from top to toe, cast their eyes down at all time and be shy and retiring. Yet as soon as the brief marriage prayer has been pronounced, these puritanical creatures are expected to turn into lusty lovers and ensure that their men find nothing more pleasurable 'in this world and the next' than their sexual services. Even the Quran has declared that 'it is delightful to enjoy sexual pleasure from women' (El Emran 14 and 15) and bedding a pretty wife has been prescribed by one of the Shiia Imams as 'the best cure' and a 'cheerful virgin's laughter and joy' is said to 'alleviate all his pains' (Ethics 14.7.84). Instantaneously women are supposed to abandon modesty 'their greatest asset' and 'when alone with their husband take off their garments and exhibit all their beauty'. They are also required to be 'generous with giving themselves to him and satisfy his every desire'. In fact, they are told not only 'to seek and satisfy his desire, but also to augment his lust'. She is instructed to 'seek out his secret fantasies and by enacting them gain hold of his heart. She must never be careless where his desires are concerned lest she loses her grip on him' (Ref.).

Suddenly the innocent young girl finds that 'the worst wives are those who, when alone with their husband, refuse his advances and deny his pleasure and do not submit to his will and do not forgive his sins' and that 'the worst wives are those who are dry unproductive, dirty, stubborn and disobedient' (Ethics 21.7.84). At the same time, however, these desirable sex objects are expected to revert to their previous modesty as soon as the man is satisfied. 'When the man leaves then the wife should put on her garments of modesty and cover herself from the eyes of the strangers' (Ref.). It is not clear how young girls can go through these repeated metamorphoses at such short intervals.

## Domesticity

The Prophet Mohamad is quoted as contrasting the good wife 'the virgin who bears children' with the bad one 'the barren woman who lacks all external beauty' and a loud mouth wife who never stays at home and is forever walking out of the house. Accordingly, the perfect wife is the obedient one who 'protects her soul and his wealth and looks after his house in his absence' (Ethics 4.8.84). The relationship in this marriage is closer to that of master and slave than anything else. This is not merely implied but openly stated. The articles on Ethics of Marriage state categorically that 'the greatest mistake of the ungodly and materialistic societies is the assumption that marriage is a partnership and a collaboration between the spouses. Such assumptions deny all the feminine attributes and ignore the female



characteristics of modesty, chastity and shame' (7.7.84). Iranian women are reminded that it is their duty to 'avoid all acts which endanger the husband and seek to please him and be faithful to him in his presence and in his absence. To be respectful and never to laugh at him nor belittle him nor make him unhappy. Never to leave the house without his permission and make herself beautiful and desirable for him' (Ethics 7.7.84). This total subordination is prescribed because men are declared to be shouldering the heavy burden of paid employment and are required to respond to the call for participating in the holy war *jahad*. The Prophet Mohamad is once more quoted as saying 'domesticity is the women's holy war' (7.7.84) no doubt to fought against the restless and lustful souls of men. Husbands are described by this ideology as 'a turbulent spirit seeking peace'. The women must make his home an enclave of tranquility and happiness. It is in this calm and secure context that men are able to express their sexual desires and prevent women from becoming frigid. Where there is no peace there will be no sexual satisfaction and where there is no sexual satisfaction there is unlikely to be any housekeeping money. The image of the perpetually aroused male drawn by the Islamic pandits to justify early marriage is conveniently transformed into this exhausted man who is unable to perform unless soothed and loved by his wife. It is argued that once men shoulder the heavy responsibility of marriage then they face 'the terrible task' of earning a family wage all on their own and this process is almost more than they can cope with. He is the public figure embattled against society 'struggling to survive a livelihood for his family' and the combat is so intense that he 'deserves rewards similar to those of martyrs' (14.7.84). It is curious how the imagery of martyrdom has begun to govern all aspects of life in Iran ; women who are deemed capable of initiating treason by their very presence are however never thought of as suitable material for martyrdom which still remains a male preserve.

Women who 'reward' their husbands well are said to make him 'selfless, hardworking and generous. His ardent wish to maintain this haven of happiness sends him out in the extremes of climate, in the cold as in the heat, to work and provide his family with food, clothing and a roof over their heads (Z 14.7.84).

## **Polygamy**

The regime's legalisation of polygamy and its encouragement of young marriages has, not surprisingly, resulted in an epidemic of often short-lived polygamy marriages ; frequently between older men taking a younger bride for a flirt and retaining the old one for work. The Family Court, who are empowered with ratification of polygamous marriages, appear to be merely concerned with the man's ability to pay housekeeping for a second wife. Temporary marriages need no approval at all and can be for as short a period as five minutes or as long as any stipulated number of years. Men can marry innumerable wives in temporary concubinage, but women can only have one husband at a time and must keep a waiting periode, *eddeh*, of about three months between each marriage. Concubinage unlike permanent marriages, does not impose a religious duty on the man to provide for the upkeep of the woman ; it is merely a prayer said to validate the satisfaction of male sexual urges. Children resulting from concubinage, however, are entitled to full inheritance.

Women whose husbands have taken other wives are crowding the family courts to try and curb this trend, but as a Zaneh Rouz reporter stated, 'the courts continue to ratify an average of six requests for polygamous marriages per hour. Just think how many polygamous marriages that makes in a week' (17.7.84). As to the first wives, they have no legal power for preventing their 'protector' from taking on many others. The religious establishment has sought to justify polygamy both on historical

and religious grounds. Women are told that the practice of polygamy in Iran and Arabia, long preceded Islam (CF A.T.). All the Qoran has done is to ratify this process and curb it by insisting that men should treat both wives equally. It is stressed that in times of war polygamy is the only viable solution for protecting young widows and female orphans who in the absence of a welfare state and non-availability of paid employment would clearly not be able to fend for themselves, domestic creatures that they have become. Failure to marry many wives would unavoidably lead to sedition. The well-known Iranian preacher, Morteza Motahari, has claimed that 'in the religion of Christ polygamy has been permitted ; the failure of polygamy to take root in the Western countries is not because of religion but because of social perfidiousness and moral tergiteude which harbours improper and haphazard affairs and ousts marital relationships' (21.7.84 Z). Thus polygamous marriage is justified both as a historical and social necessity.

Mohamad is said to have married numerous women 'because their husband had died and they were unprotected, widowed or old'. He did, however, obey the Qoranic injunction to treat them all equally. 'If he wanted to visit one wife, he always asked the permission of the others. Even in his dying bed, he insisted that the bed be moved to a different wife each day to ensure justice was done to them all' (21.7.84). It is interesting that these reports fail to state that so long as his first wife Khadijeh was alive, Mohamad was not allowed by her to take a second one. Furthermore, later in life the prophet fell passionately in love with his youngest wife Ausha, who remained his favourite to his dying day. What the Islamic clergy 'rarely', if ever refer to, is the injunction in the relevant verse in the Qoran to 'marry only one' wife (4.3) because 'try as you may you can not treat all your wives impartially' (4129). These qualifications do in fact make polygamous marriages difficult to justify on religious grounds and at least one leading clergy has been willing to publicly admit this. Ayatolah Moussavi Bojnourdi, something of a favourite with women's magazines, told Zaneh Rouz reporter that the courts should look beyond material means and see whether a man could with justice have two wives ? The Ayatolah appeared to think that this was not possible. Nevertheless, he was convinced that 'the Qoran permits men to take more than one wife'. In his opinion polygamy places too heavy a financial burden on men and could become 'economically ruinous'. Moussavi therefore thinks that polygamy is not the best way of preventing young girls and widows from falling into the trap of prostitution. It is the considered opinion of this Ayatolah that the best solution all round is for men to take numerous wives in concubinage since these brief encounters do not place any financial demands on the men and enable them to 'prevent women from being led astray'. The division between morality and immorality for this Ayatolah is clearly in the private pronouncement of a short legitimising verse in Arabic by the man to prevent the woman from being corrupted.

Wives on the whole are justifiably much more worried about polygamy than concubinage, which may still equate with prostitution - despite the religious establishment's pronouncement to the contrary. In either case, however, women have no legal control. Women are said to be 'too emotional to understand the issues. 'Frequently women refuse to consent because of their feelings, without considering the social obligation to the revolution, therefore we have imposed the wisdom and judgement of our religious courts in the matter of polygamy (Ref.). As stated earlier, this wisdom and judgement is merely a matter of estimating whether three can live on the income that had paid for two ; that is a judicial decision that the first wife should have less so that the second gets an equal share. Given the total 'control of the husband over the family income, there is little that the first wife can legally protest about.

Women's magazines are full of tales of woe and curiously enough

although they publish interview with the clergy justifying the practice of polygamy, they also carry stories of the sorrows that befall the wives. "I have been happily married for seven years and have three children" wrote one woman, "three weeks ago my husband met this woman and married her on the same day. Since then he has sold everything I ever had ; all my gold and jewelry has gone to pay for presents for her. How he wants me to leave the house and take my children off his hands so that he can start again in our home with his new wife" (Ref.).

Despite the Ayatollah's claim to the contrary, in practice polygamy seems not to provide protection for more women, but merely to displace mothers and children to make room for other potential mothers. "My father married seven wives" states another letter "he just threw us out when he married the next one. My mother, her daughter and her son, have had to fend for themselves. We were left on the streets and have never had a home since" (Z 21.7.84).

It is not only the first wife and her children who are traumatised by the experience ; young brides often fare equally badly. One such wrote to Zaneh Rouz saying that her father-in-law is for ever telling her husband that she is passed her best and it is time for him to have another one "I live in fear for being turned out" she wrote. Another 18-years-old wife wrote to Zaneh Rouz "we have been married for eight months, I am six months pregnant and he has thrown me out" (Z 21.7.84). Another letter from a 17-years-old schoolgirl tells of her polygamous marriage to a 45-years-old man "My parents married me off against my will. He kept me for three months. During this time I never felt like a wife settling in her new home. All he wanted was to use and abuse me ; he played with me like a doll and did as he pleased. I cannot bring myself to tell you the things he did to me ; all I can say is that I was a cheap toy to him. This man trampled over all my dreams and heartlessly tore me apart in his headlong pursuit of lust. Now he has left me without anything in this life. My eyes had never known tears before but all I can do now is cry for my lost youth" (2.9.84).

## Divorce

The Islamic Utopia in Iran has once more empowered men to divorce their wives at will. Since the majority of women have marriage contracts which has not specifically given them the right to initiate divorce, they are unable to benefit from the potential flexibility of Islamic marriages and divorce their husbands.

In theory women who experience mental incompatibility or religious discord or 'marital problems' can appeal to the Family Court to ask for a divorce. But they need to convince the male clerics who preside in these courts that 'the marriage has imposed an unbearable burden and an unacceptable demand on the wife' (Ayatollah Saneyi, the Public Prosecutor, quoted in K 29.3.83) ; given the current ideology of marriage and domesticity, it would

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be difficult if not impossible to

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present such proof. In practice there are only three acceptable grounds for divorce initiated by women : male impotence, male barrenness and desertion. Impotence remains a relatively simple

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matter, it must be certified by a doctor and is generally accepted as valid grounds for divorce. Male barrenness requires not only a doctor's evidence, but also a five-year trial period of the marriage for the man to prove conclusively that he is barren. Desertion was also subject to a four-years waiting period, this has finally been moved. Now five days absence without good cause by the husband is sufficient grounds to allow the wife to initiate divorce proceedings.

Desertion has for long been commonplace in Iran. This is in part because strictly speaking muslim men can divorce their wives in the presence of two men without necessarily informing the women concerned (see HA). In the 1960s and 1970s, desertion was identified as the primary cause for prostitution in Tehran (Report on the survey conducted by Tehran School of Social Work KI 10.6.72). There is no reason to think that the situation has changed, despite death sentences meted out to many prostitutes. Although it is now possible for deserted wives to obtain a formal divorce, in the absence of a husband there is no-one to pay the mahre. Islamic law stipulates that deserted women should receive a widow's pension, but the Islamic Republic has been more eager in its legislation of harsh and retributive Islamic law than taking any step towards structing the welfare measures required by Islam.

The government appears to have concentrated on draconian measures which are now implemented at the expense of justice. This is clearly illustrated by many of the decisions of the Family Courts. One example is the granting of the right of custody to all fathers at all times. An article in Zaneh Rouz justified male custody by explaining that it made divorce more difficult. 'We know that divorce imposes a heavy burden or child rearing on the man. The man caught in the infernal trap of a bad marriage, fired by the wrong doings of an evil wife and the harsh prospect of bringing up his children' will, according to Abasali Akhtari, a leading cleric, chose to keep the bad wife rather than have custody. But even when these fallacious statements are proven conclusively false, the regime remains determined to continue this practice. Zaneh Rouz published the case history of a man who had a long record of domestic violence and clearly lacked the competence to take care of his children. Nevertheless, the courts rejected the mother's plea and gave him custody ; he proceeded to kill all three children. When Ayatollah Moussavi Bojnourdi, a well known member of the judiciary, was asked to comment on this case, he replied "according to religious and legal requirements the father is entitled to have custody of his children after the stipulated age. The courts can only implement the law' (7.7.84). The same laws have already enabled fathers to murder their offspring without fear of punishment.

## Conclusions

The Islamic Republic in Iran has created two classes of citizens ; the male who benefits from the provisions of Islamic law and justice and the female who does not. With the sole exception of the right to vote, Iranian women are in all other respects formerly recognised as second class citizens who have no place in the public arena and no security in the domestic sphere. The husband has become an absolute ruler, entitled to exercise the power of life and death in his home.

Women are now legitimate sex objects, excluded from most paid employment and chained with ever increasing social and ideological ties to the uncertainties of Islamic marriage. Iranian women have little to lose and everything to gain by opposing the regime and its dicta concerning women. Thus despite the draconian measures, many women still refuse to don the veil, many others continue to fight for their jobs and some even try to initiate divorce proceedings and leave their homes. Although the

resistance is still fragmented, there are many secret women's societies currently agitating in Iran and publishing material and working to undermine the regime. Although they have been labelled as seditious, corrupt and servants of foreign powers and dealt with mercilessly when caught, there is still a remnant of pre-revolutionary women organising and fighting and developing a new embryonic women's movement to fight against the regime in Iran.

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State ideology, the media, the household and women

by Haleh Afshar