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**From Marxist Organizations to Feminism**

**Iranian Women’s Experiences of Revolution and Exile**

**Abstract**: Iranian women were extremely active during the revolution of 1979. They were or became active within various political organizations and managed to become strong advocates of women's rights and serious contributors in the women's movement when they were in exile.

As a 13-year-old girl growing up in a secular family in Iran in 1975, I never thought of becoming either a Marxist or a feminist. It was the process of living through the Islamic Revolution in Iran, being categorized as a foreigner in the US, and the years of life in exile in the Netherlands that allowed me to realize that the fight for improvements in the condition of women could not be postponed for any reason at all. It was then that I realized that the support of women's rights organizations in Iran and abroad was essential for the success of the revolution.

My past experiences have been essential in the choice of my study in anthropology and later in my choice of research on gender identity and the ways that this impact changed over time. This is the part I will present in this piece.

**When politics became everything**
The involvement of women in the Iranian revolution of 1979 took place at many different levels. Their most intense movement was political. Nahid, who lives in the United States, emphasized this point clearly: “My sister told me once: “History has given us an opportunity to be part of the revolution. Those years were so intense. Those were great years, and I always look forward to having another time like that.”

Minoo, who was then twenty years old, related her feelings: “The most wonderful thing about those years was the respect and attention women received. For the first time in decades, women from all levels of society were present in public. Neda talks about this experience: “Those years were like an open university both on a theoretical and practical level for many women, as some explicitly tell us.”

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development: “During the time of the Shah I saw that some possibilities existed for women, but only for women from the upper classes.”

Taraneh was nineteen years old then and is now living in the Netherlands. She told me that she never felt that her life was better.

There were some differences in the way the impact on women was narrated by the women I interviewed, but what they agreed on was the potential space created for women to expand their traditional boundaries did not lead to an actual improvement of women’s rights in those years. There are two main factors that can explain this process.

First, not long after the revolution, religious leaders started to limit women’s social mobility and abolish the social gains women had made. For instance, in the period of the Rastafari movement as a bourgeois deviation or, worse yet, a conspiracy against the workers’ struggle” (Shahidian 1994, 223).

Minoo’s story illustrates this contradictory aspect of empowerment and denial of the situation of women. “In those years, in order to be the god of the house in the old system lost that. Those things changed drastically in a short period of time.”

On the individual level we see the same kind of contradiction between the empowerment and the denial and we always had to keep our distance. But when I became politically active we had mixed meetings in our organization. “I did not talk to everybody. It was difficult, I had lots of limitations, and for myself I did not feel comfortable.”

Few of the women expressed themselves in this matter. Most of them did not mention this feeling of discomfort. In order to avoid this feeling of discomfort, they went to mixed-gender parties and had boyfriends during the time of the Shah. In spite of the differences, the amount of interaction between the sexes and its intensity had increased for almost all the women I interviewed. This increased interaction was accompanied by the denial of their womanhood and their sexuality. I will elaborate on both aspects here.
Womanhood denied

In terms of denial of womanhood, the ideal revolutionary type was a very masculine figure. Women within leftist organizations were often depicted as strong, capable, and able to perform tasks that were traditionally assigned to men. This was particularly evident in the mountains where they had to carry heavy backpacks intended for boys of 1.8 meters in height. Later, Samira, who carried such a backpack for three days of hiking, experienced pain in her back, and stated that these kinds of things were wrong. She still has problems with her back after all these years.

Samira mentions the same point: “It was really strange, you know, in the mountains, we as girls were supposed to carry the backpacks just like the boys do. We had to carry it for a week because of carrying a heavy backpack the whole day. I really liked it then, but all that pain was unbelievable.”

To bear all that pain or physical harshness to become more like a man was one denial of womanhood. Another was that women were expected to suppress their sexual attraction to the revolutionaries. This was visible in the baggy clothes and absence of cosmetics among female revolutionary activists (Shahidian 1994, 234).

In the denial of their sexuality, women talked about the various ways they suppressed their sexual attraction. For example, Sima, who was nineteen during that time, told me her thoughts on this matter: “We went to the mountains together with the boys. No, I did not feel any sexual difference. The sexual differences were not there and this was because I thought it was not even normal. I never thought of such matters.”

Moghissi also highlights this issue: “Most veteran Fedayeen [the large leftist guerilla organization of that time-HG] issued an internal guideline on how members and supporters should choose their mates (Shahidian 1994, 233).”

In those years, marriage had to serve political goals; otherwise, it was unnecessary. In this sense, the content of marriage was different from what we know today. Most veteran Fedayeen cadres married after the revolution. In essence, they were arranged marriages of a political type (Moghissi 1994, 131).”
Mojgan was very young – fifteen years old – during the revolution: “When I worked in a political organization, I did not think about anything else. I was so busy with my political activities that I did not have time for other things.”

Sayeh comments about this situation: “In those years there was a great atmosphere. But the problem was that we did not have the time to say that everyone who was there was thinking like this. I say that I missed the experiences of youth in that period.”

The politicized atmosphere of the years of freedom gave political identity a dominant character. Other identities, such as the identity of women or the identity of researchers, were marginalized. Political identity was the strong leading factor in life.

When being political became a crime

Those years of freedom were beautiful, but they did not last. Years full of hope and optimism changed to years full of fear and emptiness: a period called “the years of suppression” by many. In the first months after the revolution, various political groups began clashing. Although people were free to participate in politics, the consequences of political engagement were severe.

As discussed earlier, political identity gained precedence during the years of freedom. The political space and political identity became dominant. This was especially the case for women. Despite the gains of the Women’s Movement, political identity of women was often marginalized. Women were often seen as second-class citizens in political and social spheres.

How did it feel to be a woman?

In the previous part, women expressed their views on the ways in which gender relations changed during the first years of the Islamic Republic. Women spoke about how the intensive years of political activism ended and women once again faced second-class status on a daily basis.

During this time, people could be attacked on the street for various reasons. One such reason was being a woman with a political background. Family law changes minimized women’s rights in the cases of divorce and child custody. Two of
the women who lost their husbands during that time remained in shock for years. Their pain became even deeper when their children left them and their legal custody of their children (Kar 1996; Mir-Hosseini 1993). The new law introduced a division of custody rights into hadana (care) and wilaya (supervision). After 1985, it was thinkable for women to gain hadana custody—if they were proven to be “fit mothers”—but wilaya was exclusively given to men. Also, “[t]he duality inherent in such a division of custody rights has been minimized by the fact that, in practice, men have gained control of the hadana and the women have lost all rights” (Kar 1996, 153). It is obvious that the women interviewed for this article could never came close to gaining even hadana custody, because they could not be considered as “fit mothers” with their Marxist backgrounds. They lost their husbands and children and were left without men and homes.

Women, who experienced higher social mobility in the first years of the revolution, were faced with many legal and social restrictions later on. The revolution (Afshar 1987; Saadatmand 1995; Sanasarian 1982; Nashat 1983; Paidar 1996; Reeves 1989; Tabari 1982). It was a drastic turning point that had many social, legal, and economic consequences for women. Women who were political activists before the Iranian revolution or who were active in international activist movements had many problems in finding a partner after the revolution, because the time they spent on political activities was not considered as good time to find a partner. Most of the unmarried women of this study married during the period of suppression. Their choice of partner was based on the fact that they were safe to marry people from other social classes, but not people from political movement. That was a strange situation, because we never expressed our feelings to each other and that we never had privacy to be together. It is strange that we never had time to be together and to express our feelings to each other.

Even when love was present, it was strongly suppressed, which Jaleh later regretted. Jaleh, then a twenty-two-year-old student of the Political Science Institute, said: “In the time of struggle it would be a shame if I think of you, my love.” You know what I regret the most is that we never had time to be together and to express our feelings to each other. It is strange because I thought that we were fighting for beautiful things. Is not love beautiful, then?”

As was the case during the period of freedom, marriage was strongly connected to political considerations during the years of suppression. Years of free social interaction turned into strict segregation of opposite sexes. Most of the unmarried women of this study married during the period of suppression. Their choice of partner was based on the fact that they were safe to marry people from other social classes, but not people from political movement. That was a strange situation, because we never expressed our feelings to each other and that we never had privacy to be together. It is strange that we never had time to be together and to express our feelings to each other.

“You had the time to think”

When political activity became dangerous, the amount of activity decreased drastically. Activists who had spent their time to have important political discussions now had to find time to reflect on personal matters. “You had the time to think”
From Marxist Organizations to Feminism

Having so much time to think back over the reasons for their activism made people realize that their expectations were not being met. They were now forced to limit their activities on a political level and to question their political involvement, women now had time to focus on other aspects of their lives.

From Marxist Ideologists to Feminists

The past experiences of the women of this study changed them in many ways. They can no longer be satisfied with a simple life. "For many, new ideals have replaced old political ideals. What almost all of them have in common is the wish to help others," said Sepideh. "I want to help people." For many, new ideals have replaced old political ideals. What almost all of them have in common is the wish to help others.

Others seek to contribute by voluntary involvement in various human and women's rights organizations. Most of the women in both countries consider themselves as advocates of women's rights. Sepideh, who now lives in the U.S., can be considered one of the few women who have been a feminist both in Iran and during the exile. During the revolution, it was women's questions that attracted Sepideh, who later said, "during this evolution, these were the questions that attracted me. For Sepideh, being a feminist is manifested in her activities within different women's organizations.

The truth of Sepideh's claim to being a feminist is manifested in her activities within different women's organizations. Bita could be considered as one of the few women who have been a feminist both in Iran and during the exile. During the revolution, it was women's questions that attracted Sepideh, who later said, "during this evolution, these were the questions that attracted me. For Sepideh, being a feminist is manifested in her activities within different women's organizations.
Bita talked with me extensively about the difficulties she had as a feminist in that period in Iran. Once in exile, the space was there, so they grasped the opportunity. The new space in exile led to an explosion of the activity of Iranian women. The political atmosphere of those years left those achievements latent. Additionally, most of the women, especially the younger ones, did not leave much space for them to act upon their gender awareness in order to change their living conditions. The political aspect was not there anymore, they started to question and reevaluate the reasons for their marriage.

Marriage challenged in exile

It is generally accepted that the process of migration changes the family structure of married couples. Different studies have shown that migration is a process of identity restructuring. In this sense a process of negotiation came into existence that involved both men and women.

Conclusion

The women involved in political activism in Iran experienced a shift in gender relations. The political atmosphere of those years left those achievements latent. Additionally, most of the women, especially the younger ones, did not leave much space for them to act upon their gender awareness in order to change their living conditions. The political aspect was not there anymore, they started to question and reevaluate the reasons for their marriage.

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Endnotes

1 For safety reasons and to protect the anonymity of the women interviewed.

2 For more on these differences see Ghorashi 2003.

3 For further studies on the position of women after the revolution, see the following: on compulsory veiling, Gerami 1994; V.M. Moghadam 1993; on legal rights, Afshar 1987; Nashat 1983; Reeves 1989; Tabari 1982; Sanaserian 1982.


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