**Female Agency and Empowerment:**

**Islamic Feminism in Iran**

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## Introduction

The subject of gender relations in Iran has long been a contentious social and political issue and has since become more controversial with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Popular news outlets such as CNN and BBC have reported that the subsequent “Islamization” pursued by the Islamic Republic has resulted in the reversal of women’s rights in Iran.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some scholars, however, argue that the policies implemented by the Islamic Republic have in fact “facilitated education, mobilization, and participation” for many women within the cultural context of the country and region.[[2]](#footnote-2) While the early years following the Revolution served to restrict many women in certain regards, the policies enacted by the Islamic Republic have provided avenues of empowerment for some of the most marginalized women in Iran. Such empowerment, though limited, has been an unintentional consequence of the Islamic Republic’s efforts. Women who were mobilized during the Iranian revolutionary process have used these policies to seek greater rights within the context of an Islamic society. The increasing women’s movement in Iran then seems to stem from two important developments: 1) the female agency rooted in the mobilization of women during the Iranian Revolution and 2) the unintended widespread empowerment of women through policies of Islamization. In this historical context, the birth and rise of Islamic feminism challenges arguments which claim gender inequality as being essential to Islam.

While canonical texts may favor certain normative interpretations over others, gender equality interpretations of Islam are a definite, though uphill, development. At the same time, the break from Western influence in the Islamic Republic and the increasing women’s movement in the country indicates the existence of a dissent against patriarchal interests and a female agency amongst Muslim women within both the Iranian culture and the Islamic faith. The recognition of both the gains and the losses, in regards to the status of women under the Islamic Republic, is essential to a more nuanced and informed understanding of gender issues and women’s pursuit of greater rights in Iran. This paper aims to reveal the complexities of the lived experiences of Muslim women in spite of the largely generalized image given by both the state and the international community. The notable gains in the education and health of Iranian women as well as the country’s growing wave of female activism in the post-revolutionary period indicate increased levels of empowerment while the continued economic and political exclusion of women and strict domestic attitudes simultaneously point to sustained marginalization. The complexity of the role of Islamization in both the marginalization and the empowerment of Iranian women – especially as more data and long-term trends become available to study – speaks to the need to reassess many of the generalizations surrounding Iranian women and the greater population of Muslim women around the world.

I will first briefly summarize the broader debate between Islam and feminism before discussing the impacts of the creation of the Islamic Republic on Iranian women. I will analyze both the policies and social changes under the Islamic Republic as well as the data trends regarding Iran provided by international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). I will then go into a more detailed discussion on women’s agency and feminism specifically in Iran. The research suggests that the policies implemented by the Islamic Republic have inadvertently fostered a healthier, better educated, and politically more active and assertive female population and sheds light on the legitimacy of a rapidly growing and evolving form of feminism that is within the Islamic context.

## Islam and Feminism Debate

The debate surrounding Islam and feminism can be traced back to the complex legacy of the political and cultural encroachment of European colonialism in the Middle East. Following the colonization of what are now considered Middle Eastern countries, “a new discourse on women emerged, overlaying rather than displacing the old classical and religious formulations on gender and often linking issues concerning women, national and national advancement, and cultural change.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The dominant discourse about women, which was then governed by elite male Muslim intellectuals, advocated for the improvement of women’s status via the abandonment of the native culture in favor of the Western culture. Ahmed cites what she calls “the colonization of consciousness” – the internalization of colonial notions that assert the innate superiority of the European over the native – to have complicated feminism in Islam.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Western interest in Muslim women gained traction with the rise of imperialism and the issue of women’s rights was soon co-opted to primarily emphasize the superiority of Western culture. In a sense, the improvement of women became a central issue only with the rise of Western power and the declining fortunes of the Muslim societies under colonization. Feminism in Western societies may have been a critique of white male dominance but outside the borders of the Western world, feminism became a tool with which to assert moral superiority over ‘inferior’ cultures. It is in this particular context that the links between women, nationalism, and culture were forged and the languages of Westernization and feminism were fused. It is due to this context that some contemporary Muslim women, whose actions and beliefs may reflect those of feminism, do not identify as feminists. A comprehensive discussion regarding Islam and feminism then must not only include a history of the experiences of Muslim women but also a history of Western political and economic encroachment over Muslim societies and the struggles against it.

In contemporary times, pervasive stereotypes which inherently link gender inequality and Islam continue to be central to Western discourse regarding feminism in Islamic societies. Lila Abu-Lughod, in her article “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?”, wrote on how the Muslim woman has been used as an instrument to obscure historical and political dynamics and how the resulting “obsession with the plight of Muslim women” has cemented a particular understanding of Islam that claims its women need liberating.[[5]](#footnote-5) This reification of cultural difference has served to silence Muslim women in conversations regarding their own experiences and has essentially defined Islam and feminism in binary opposition. These discussions have further delineated feminism into a black-and-white issue that undermines any critical understanding regarding the empowerment of Muslim women as well as all women throughout the world. While feminism is at times conceived to be a Western construct by some in the Muslim world, many Muslim women outside of the West have been active in modern forms of feminist activism in reaction to European colonial efforts. They have actively challenged patriarchal forms and practices using an Islamic discourse. Throughout the 20th century writers such as Malak Nassef, Mai Ziyada, Huda Sha’arawi, Doria Shafik, Nawal El-Saadawi, and Alifa Rifaat have all played significant roles in articulating the discourses of female subjectivity within Islamic societies.[[6]](#footnote-6) Their writings, much of which predate the second-wave of modern feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, destabilize the essentialist notions that pit feminism and Islam in opposition to each other.

More recently, the rise of political Islam in the 1970s in particular offered an opportunity, often ignored in much of the dominant discourse, for many Muslim women to “reconcile their faith with their new gender awareness.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Such reconciliation manifested in three ways: textual interpretations, political ideology, and personal experience. The interpretations and re-interpretations of sacred texts, which have been invoked as sources of political authority and legitimacy, have become important in reshaping gender relations in Muslim societies. It is in this context that the term ‘Islamic feminism’ emerged, as feminist reinterpretations of Shar’ia law accompanied the rise of political Islam. The term ‘Islamic feminism’ arose to distinguish between Muslim women who work specifically within Islamic frameworks to address the gender disparities regarding opportunities, power, control of resources and of self, employment, and education and other women who are less interested in Islamic reformation and advocate for gender equality within a secular network. Researchers like Samuli Schielke, who has written on the need for the anthropology of Islam to address the ambivalence of everyday religious and moral practices, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, who has analyzed the interplay between contemporary religious discourses and the actual experiences of Muslim women, point to a necessary shift in the research literature regarding Islam.[[8]](#footnote-8) The essentialist notion that Islam and feminism are inherently incompatible makes existing female agency invisible, discredits the efforts that women in Islamic societies have made, and reinforces an ethnocentric view informed by the continuing legacies of Western colonialism and imperialism. An increased focus on the lived experiences of individuals and local communities, which Schielke and Mir-Hosseini advocate for, would shed light on the agency of Muslim women that would have otherwise been invisibilized.

In spite of the budding shift, research literature regarding women in Islam has predominantly been “ideologically charged, and has become an arena for polemics masquerading as scholarly debate.”[[9]](#footnote-9) For instance, the notion of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ – seen in the political narratives of British-ruled Egypt under Lord Cromer, of French nationals in Algeria in the 1950s, and of Laura Bush following the start of the ‘War on Terror’ which claim to be liberating Muslim women – has drowned out any productive conversation on female empowerment cognizant of cultural differences.[[10]](#footnote-10) The polemics of the debates regarding Muslim women have replaced the actual Muslim women as the center of the conversation involving gender relations in Islamic societies. The question of whether Islam and feminism are compatible has then ironically contributed to the silencing of the women it aims serve.

“By the time the [War on Terror] started, feminists like [Eleanor] Smeal could be found cozily chatting with the generals about their shared enthusiasm for Operation Enduring Freedom and the possibility of women pilots commandeering F-16s.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Narratives from Afghan women as well as the role of the U.S. in creating their inhumane conditions were lost in these conversations. Organized actions such as the Feminist Majority’s ‘Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan’ campaign and nationwide rallies against the Taliban have effectively shifted focus away from the actual experiences of women to cultural essentialisms that assume Islam’s female oppression. The irony is hard to miss here. Female pilots who would subject an unlimited amount of violence onto both Afghan men and women alike appear as symbols of women’s empowerment in these narratives. Cultural essentialisms further contribute to the silencing of Muslim women and their experiences. Their portrayal of Islam and feminism in essential opposition, reinforced by the aforementioned narratives, perpetuates stereotypes which attempt to neatly reify an incredibly heterogeneous, diverse population of women.

Regardless of the widespread views about the plight of Muslim women,’ Muslim women exhibit a sense of localized agency in spite of the limited empowerment their respective governments afford them. Dominant feminist scholarship has framed conservative Muslim women in terms of internalized patriarchal interests and has thus understood agency as active resistance to subordination. Saba Mahmood, however, argues for a re-conceptualization of agency, not as resistance, but as “a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Her ethnography on Egyptian women squarely focuses on self-fashioned conceptions of moral agency and discipline that conservative Muslim women have illustrated. The women within the study veil as an externalization of self-control; worn not for its symbolic significance but in a desire to embody piety. While the compulsion to veil has been founded on structural gender inequality, the role of female agency in the matter proves a crucial aspect to a discipline which for many is largely voluntary. These women have displayed a sense of agency, though docile, in spite of and, simultaneously, because of the patriarchal norms which surround them. Mahmood draws on what Judith Butler has called the paradox of subjectivation – in which “the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent” – to explain the docile agency found in conservative Muslim women.[[13]](#footnote-13) Mahmood’s study is a testament to the localized, individual female agency that does in fact exist within Islamic societies in spite of the generalizations of the greater discourse. A focus at the lived experiences of Muslim women – their opportunities, power, control of resources and of self, employment, and education– is then a more effective means of acknowledging the agency of Muslim women and addressing the debate regarding gender equality in the Muslim societies.

From this perspective, a reconsideration and deconstruction of the concepts of both Islam and feminism would be the right approach to reconcile the two. The idea that Islam and feminism are incompatible must be both theoretically and empirically challenged in order for Muslim women to benefit from global feminist politics as well as influence its agenda in their own interests. The global feminist movement – which strives to work with an intersectional lens to better reflect the multi-layered experiences that women of all backgrounds face – would benefit from the inclusivity that would result from such reconciliation. The incorporation of marginalized groups is necessary to maintain a cohesive enough collective to avoid stagnation and remain effective. The critique of persistent binaries – East versus West, secular versus religious, and traditional versus modern – would result in a more constructive dialogue within the global feminist movement which transcends cultural boundaries.

## The Revolution and the Creation of an Islamic State

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 included varying degrees of secular, liberal, and radical opposition which even the clergy were divided amongst. These diverse groups were united only in their opposition to the monarchial Pahlavi regime. As the regime began to deteriorate in the face of growing public dissatisfaction, the Islamists were shown to be the most coherent of opposition groups. Upon rising to power, they imposed their own vision and narrative over the revolutionary trajectory and marginalized the perspectives and experiences of other participants in the revolutionary struggle. In order to properly contextualize the ongoing development of Iranian women, a distinction must be made between the popular and largely pluralistic anti-shah uprisings and the religious revivalist movement that pursued an exclusivist ideological agenda. The Revolution was largely driven by “pluralist and populist ideals” that simultaneously coincided with the religious overtones of the collective national opposition since “Islam was gradually highlighted as the predominant element in the native cultural heritage.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The successful establishment of the exclusivist Islamic Republic of Iran in lieu of these ideals was partially due to the ability of Ayatollah Khomeini to galvanize massive Iranian participation during the uprising and the consolidation of the Republic’s ideology during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The eight-year war not only consolidated the puritanical hierarchy of the new state power but also gave nationalist incentives to eliminate those who dissented. The economic and social conditions of the war did, however, provide many Iranian women with significant opportunities to participate in the public sphere as the traditional society’s resistance gradually declined. Hashemi Rafsanjani, who would go on to be president of Iran but was then the Speaker of Iran’s parliament, the Majlis, even said, “When the war is over and the economy improves and expands, you will see that we will have a shortage of manpower, and then the need for women will be greater.”[[15]](#footnote-15) As the nation unified in the face of external aggression, the role of Iranian women during the eight-year war, similar to that of women during World Wars in Western societies, established a new sense of agency which paved the way for the increasing female activism in Iran.

The subsequent regime policies to cleanse any vestiges of Westernization have resulted in the development of multiple paradoxes in regards to the status of Iranian women. The establishment of Shar’ia law placed a cleric (*rahbar*)atop the Iranian government system to oversee the country’s political structure and ensure its adherence to an exclusivist Islamic ideology. Though institutions, such as parliament and presidency, are popularly elected, a religious hierarchy maintains control over the state. Neither the state nor the Islamic establishment, however, is by any means monolithic. The reality of Iranian society has exposed political, religious, and moral fault lines which have distorted popular notions of a homogenous and unified society.

The 1979 Revolution politicized the mass of Iranian women but the expectations of many women were not realized. Though women had the right to vote and run for parliament under the Khomeini decade, women were shuffled into traditionally female professions and the initial policies on social issues regarding women were harsh. Social controls gradually eased under the Rafsanjani presidency. The High Council of the Cultural Revolution, under President Rafsanjani in 1992, adopted a set of employment policies which, while reinforcing the importance of strict family and gender roles, encouraged the integration of more women into the labor force and implemented an aggressive campaign to spread awareness of the benefits of small families via free, government-provided seminars and contraceptive devices. These initiatives resulted in a drastic decrease in fertility rate as well as a change in marriage pattern, with the average female age at first marriage increasing from 19.7 in 1976 to 22.4 in 1996.[[16]](#footnote-16) A more formidable wave of pro-reform sentiment, however, came with Mohammad Khatami’s years as his surprise election victory “gave expression to a popular reformist movement that sought a shift from the theocratic to democratic elements of the Islamic Republic.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Under Khatami, 1997-2005, Iran had its first female vice president, first woman chancellor of an Iranian university, and 13 female parliamentary members. Women also won several legal victories regarding marriage age and divorce compensations. The Khatami years further held a surge in non-governmental organizations founded around women’s issues.

Upon the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, hardliners attempted to curb the momentum of Iranian women as they continued to gain political clout. Although Ahmadinejad is considered a hardline president, he seemed to convey open-mindedness regarding women’s rights. In 2011, he ordered immediate cancellation to plans to segregate sexes at some Iranian universities.[[18]](#footnote-18) In his attempts to maintain the support of his popular constituency and his political allies, however, much of his policies regarding gender issues have more often than not been in accordance with the Islamic Republic’s patriarchal rhetoric. These efforts generally fared poorly for women on several fronts including strict dress code enforcements and the government closure of *Zanan*, the country’s leading feminist magazine. The widespread protests following Ahmadinejad’s 2009 re-election – which included tens of thousands of women from all social classes – was met with harsh government suppression. The recent election of reformist Hasan Rouhani has created an atmosphere of optimism for many Iranian women hoping to regain the momentum of a women’s movement once had under Khatami.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that Islamic feminism is inevitable as the Islamic Republic continues to develop. As Islam shifts from an oppositional discourse in national politics to an official state ideology, those in power “have to deal with the contradiction between their political agenda and their rhetoric: they must both uphold the family, restoring women to their ‘true and high’ status in Islam, and at the same time retain the patriarchal mandates of shari’a legal rules.”[[19]](#footnote-19) While the establishment of an Islamic state may initially see stricter restrictions on women, given the patriarchal mandates of the current reigning authorities, the state adoption of Islamic ideology provides an unprecedented space for change. The ideological fundamentalists appear to be “losing their hold on power and their legitimacy” as more and more Iranians, many of whom are conservative in their faith, become empowered through both state policies and their own agency.[[20]](#footnote-20) At the same time, the regime has achieved notable success in the areas of rural development, health, family planning, and education. Many Iranian women then simultaneously embody and violate the social changes implemented by the Islamic Republic as they utilize their limited empowerment from the state to occupy spaces they were never initially meant to. The break from West that the Islamic Republic has promoted may ironically contribute to this more indigenous form of feminism which claims greater popular legitimacy and challenges female oppression from an Islamic point of view. The policies enacted by the Islamic Republic have inadvertently fostered a healthier, better educated, and more critical female population with increasing agency and claims of legitimacy within the Iranian context.

## Gender Related Laws, Policies, and Social Changes

In this section, I will analyze both the policies and social changes under the Islamic Republic in order to provide empirical data on the lived experiences of Iranian women. The Family Protection Law of 1967/1975 (FPL), under the Pahlavi regime, made fewer distinctions between the rights of men and women than the laws it replaced. Women were guaranteed the right to education, equal pay for equal work, and maternity leave. In practice, however, many women, especially those in the rural regions of Iran, were unaware of these rights and thus their lived experience was not affected by the law or its repeal after the revolution. The abolition of the FPL and the establishment of Shar’ia family law after 1979 were, however, specifically aimed at rolling back the modest gains women had before the Revolution. The concerns regarding westernization under the shah manifested in anti-imperialist reforms that targeted such policies. Both religious scholars and secular lawyers under the Islamic Republic looked into different sources and interpretations of Shari’a law in order to propose a distinct alternative to the FPL.[[21]](#footnote-21) The ways in which Shar’ia law was initially implemented in Iran was an intentional strategy to serve patriarchal and anti-imperialist interests. These efforts were made in an attempt to cleanse the country of any westernization that occurred under the shah’s rule and conveniently coincided with the patriarchal interests that became ascendant with the revolution. Many Iranian women, however, became very insistent upon their rights “given the high level of participation by women in political demonstrations before, during and after the Revolution.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The rise of Islamic feminism and the movement for the reform of Islam has thus been, as Saïd Arjomand states, “very much a product of the children of the Islamic revolution” and can be considered one the of the unintended consequences of the Islamic Republic.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In this regard, an important initiative of the new regime that would improve the conditions of women was The Reconstruction Jihad that began as a volunteer movement to help with the 1979 harvest but soon took on a broader and more official role with a new government emphasis on improving the rural conditions. These development programs carried out “road building, piped water, electrification, clinics, schools, and irrigation canals.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Though many peasants still remained marginalized without proper land reform, rural life in many other ways improved. These developments – especially the building of schools and clinics – were essential to the increase in education and public health that has served to empower Iranian women who were not otherwise accessible.

The gains in education and public health in Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic are impressive. In the field of education, schools receive significant government funding, which makes the construction of schools in villages and poor neighborhoods possible, and thus there has been an increase in accessibility. The “enforcement of single-sex primary and secondary schools (which have been dominant even before) and religious leaders’ endorsement of girls’ education” have further facilitated the accessibility of education to girls in the rural, impoverished, and more conservative areas of the country.[[25]](#footnote-25) Under the Rafsanjani presidency, the 2002-2003 women’s tertiary enrollment exceeded those of men for the first time since the establishment of universities in Iran. With the new regime, not only has literacy approached universality among young males and females but the percentage of women among university admissions has continually risen, reaching “about 66 percent by 2003.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

In regards to public health, a major issue which particularly affected women and children during the Revolution, successive governments have channeled a great deal of resources into health programs and the creation of a grassroots health care network that has transformed access to health care in many areas, including the most remote and deprived. The government also strongly encouraged population growth and encouraged families to have more children in the first decade following the Revolution. Alongside the impressive advancements in overall public health, this rise in birth rates resulted in “a population explosion of those now aged thirteen to twenty-three,” the age group now most disillusioned with the regime.[[27]](#footnote-27) Islamist rulers have thus undertaken a number of policies that have, inadvertently, encouraged the development of a larger, healthier, better-educated, and more critical population of Iranian women throughout the country in spite of their enforced second-class citizenship.

## Current Trends in Gender Inequality in Iran

Some have attributed the broad decline in female labor force participation and employment in the direct aftermath of the 1979 Revolution to the impact of Islamization. While many middle-class and elite women in the more urban areas of Iran were either forced or pressured to leave their jobs, the disruptions in Iranian trade industries, which many women before the Revolution occupied, may have held a greater impact than Islamist policies. The much larger and broader decline in female employment in rural areas, in which Islamization was not an issue, is indicative of this impact. It is important to note, however, that the expansion of education played a significant role in reducing female labor participation. While Islamization facilitated that process, it has aided in only postponing the now more realized entry of women in the labor force. The improvements since the Revolution have positively affected women’s employment as professional and technical jobs become more accessible to a healthier and more-educated female population.

According to an analysis of Iranian census data, there has been a shift of female employment away from agricultural and manufacturing sectors to the service sector, particularly education, health, and social services.[[28]](#footnote-28) In 1966, female employment in the manufacturing sector reached its peak at just over 55 percent with the service sector nearly reaching 20 percent. By 1986, the manufacturing sector dropped to just over 20 percent while the service sector rose to almost 45 percent. Female employment in the service sector reaches nearly 50 percent by 2006 while the manufacturing sector remains under 25 percent. The structural transformation of the Iranian economy and women’s increasing education and expanded job preferences under the policies implemented by the Islamic Republic provide an explanation for this trend.

The rapid expansion of female education, the demographic transition from the population explosion, and large Iranian oil revenues have all factored into the economic growth of Iran, which has been contrary to the trends in many developing countries whose economic growth has been attributed to the channeling of cheap female labor into manufacturing for exports. In line with resource curse theories, the rise of the oil industry in Iran has in fact “[reduced] the number of women in the labor force, which in turn reduces their political influence.”[[29]](#footnote-29) According to the modernization theory as articulated by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, industrialization facilitates women’s entrance into the paid workforce, initiates a cultural shift which values gender equality and, through underpinning structural reforms and women’s rights, gives rise to political demands in women’s interests. Cultural legacies and religious traditions, however, set the pace of such change and Inglehart and Norris argue that an Islamic religious heritage is one off the most powerful barriers to gender equality.[[30]](#footnote-30) In spite of this argument, Iran has made several strides towards gender equality.

[Figure 1 about here]

According to the UNDP, as seen in Figure 1, the Gender Inequality Index (GII) of Iran had been steadily improving from 2000 to 2005. Though there was an increase in gender inequality following the 2005 presidential election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the 2013 data indicates an all-time low for inequality since the development of the index.[[31]](#footnote-31) This data, as well as the 2013 presidential election of reformist Hassan Rouhani, shed light on a shift in Iranian politics towards more open-minded dialogue regarding the status of Iranian women. The GII is measured in three dimensions: the labor market, reproductive health, measured by the maternal mortality ratio and the adolescent fertility rate, and empowerment, measured by parliamentary representation and secondary and higher education attainment levels.[[32]](#footnote-32) The increasing levels of equality for Iranian women according to the GII from 2000 to 2005 can be attributed to the improvement in health and education fields under the policies of the Islamic Republic during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami. Turkey, with its secular and more democratic government, was in fact very similar to Iran in regards to GII in 2005. The women’s rights movement in Iran, however, lost momentum after 2005 with the election of Islamist hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Presidency. The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap reaffirms how little advancement Iranian women had under his presidency, with little progress in economic participation, education, and political empowerment. The health sub-index even regressed during the Ahmadinejad administration.[[33]](#footnote-33) This suggests that gender inequality, as understood by international indexes, is not necessarily inherent to Iran’s Islamic culture but rather a result of concrete government policies shaped by opposing ideological visions. These improvements, though gradual and not without their limitations, towards gender equality in Iran does indicate a growing climate within the Islamic framework that is sympathetic towards achieving gains for women. More gender progressive government policy initiatives, even if ahead of public opinion, can consolidate and reinforce the still growing social and cultural shift that many Iranian women have been advocating for.

[Figure 2 about here]

In spite of the increased accessibility to education and health care for women, however, actual entry into the labor force and attainment of political leadership still remains very limited. With a private sector too weak to create job opportunities, the Iranian government has failed to pick up the slack in creating a coherent and effective means to take advantage of the potential labor force in Iranian women.[[34]](#footnote-34) The dependence of the Iranian economy on the country’s oil revenues seems to have led to a decline in female employment which has in turn contributed to a lack of female political representation. The result is that, as Michael Ross states, “oil-producing states are left with atypically strong patriarchal norms, laws, and political institutions.”[[35]](#footnote-35) There doesn't seem to be a significant trend, however, in the relationship between oil rents and aggregate gender inequality as seen in Figure 2. While Iran has both high oil rents and high gender inequality, the data from countries such as Egypt, who has significantly fewer oils rents but maintains a higher GII, and Jordan, who has zero oil rents and is doing only slightly better in gender equality, dispute Ross’s claims.

Figure 2 also indicates that countries with higher Muslim population do not necessarily have higher levels of gender inequality. Economic development, however, seems to be significantly correlated with gender equality. The Middle East follows a similar trend to that of the larger international community: the higher the GDP per capita, the lower the levels of gender inequality and vice versa. In spite of Iran’s higher GII score than Turkey, the UNDP’s Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) from 2007 to 2008 indicated that Iran was doing better than Turkey in terms of female professional and technical workers and female leadership and managerial positions. Though Turkey’s GDP per capita is significantly greater than that of Iran, the GEM also indicated that Iran was doing better than Turkey in terms of the ratio of estimated female to male earned income.[[36]](#footnote-36) While increasing affluence does tend to generate the expansion of literacy and educational attainment and growth of accessible healthcare, higher levels of GDP per capita do not necessarily translate into de facto women’s rights. It has become apparent that issues of gender equality are “more complex and intractable than the early developmental theorists assumed.”[[37]](#footnote-37) These trends reveal the complex nature of gender relations in Iran and speak to the need to reassess many of the generalizations regarding Iranian women as well as the larger global population of Muslim women.

The continued marginalization of Iranian women then seems to be largely due to governmental policies reflecting the patriarchal interests of those in positions of power. The fact that women have done better under the Islamic Republic than under the secular Turkey in certain respects suggest that the Islamic versus secular dichotomy is not very useful to make sense of the multidimensional nature of women’s empowerment in Muslim societies. The rise of a powerful reformist movements led by those such as Khatami and newly elected president Rouhani is an important example of the multivocalism within Islamic circles which characterize the question of gender equality.

## Women’s Agency and Feminism in the Islamic Republic

In the years immediately following the formation of the Islamic Republic, the reigning rhetoric and policies saw to the restriction of Iranian women based on a notion of fundamental gender difference. The regressive policies of the Islamic Republic – which emphasized “women’s domesticity, [gender] difference, and [cultural] danger” – fostered a hostile social environment for all Iranian women, with the educated, Western-oriented, upper-middle class women bearing the brunt of the regime’s program.[[38]](#footnote-38) The response of Iranian women, ranging from support to outright hostility to these policies, varied by class and political ideology and exhibited a continued female participation in public life even during the more repressive years of the 1980s which indicates a sense of agency amongst Iranian women. These policies have negative implications for gender equality: an “increasing fertility and population growth; a decline in female labor force participation, particularly in the industrial sector; [a] lack of progress in literacy and educational attainment; and a sex ratio that favored males” and thus the gender relations of Iran had been characterized by a pronounced inequality.[[39]](#footnote-39) These new gender policies – with their social and domestic restrictions as well as the resulting lack of female representation in politics and the labor force – reflected an embracing of patriarchal interests and second-class citizenship for women.

Nonetheless, other policies pursued by the Islamic Republic have effectively undermined and reversed the Iranian strategy regarding women. As discussed in the previous section, international health and education indexes regarding gender have now reached near parity in Iran. While health and education began to reach a more diverse population of Iranian women, changes in the political and cultural atmosphere regarding gender relations did not occur until the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, who saw to a “program for economic liberalization and integration into the global economy,” and the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, who addressed “the growth and vitality of Iranian civil society, a movement for political and cultural reform, and a movement for women’s rights.”[[40]](#footnote-40) The ambiguities in the Islamist discourses throughout the years since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, as well as the legitimacy afforded to women who abided by the Islamist policies, allowed better educated, healthier, and more socioeconomically diverse women to maneuver within the gender system of the Islamic State. In such a position, now with a more legitimate right to raise concerns in the eyes of the state, Iranian women were better equipped to voice criticisms of and objections to the barriers and restrictions that the regime imposes.

Many Iranian women have been deeply conscious of their social status within the Islamic Republic and have been exhibiting resilience and active resistance to the injustices they face. International indexes involving political participation in regards to gender inequality, however, fail to account for the non-electoral political process that many Iranian women participate in. To further the contrast between reality and media portrayal, Iranian women have exhibited agency in organized protests and rallies and active participation in the dominant political discourse via press and filmmaking. The creative ways in which Iranian women have asserted their agency within the limited avenues afforded by the regime are highlighted in Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s documentary, *Divorce Iranian Style*, in which several Iranian women file for divorce and navigate the Islamic framework of law in strategic and rational self-interest.[[41]](#footnote-41) Zahra Rahnavard – a renowned writer, university lecturer, author of a radical-populist Islamic perspective on social classes and inequality, and the wife of Hussein Mousavi, the former prime minister and reformist presidential candidate in 2009, – has told reporters, “Women have been active and present, at times larger numbers than men, in all our public demonstrations. But when it comes to political appointments, they are pushed aside.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Such statements speak on the failure of the Islamic Republic to truly elevate the legal, economic, and social status of women and thus predict the quiet revolution, manifested in the ways which Iranian women have creatively and strategically navigated the Islamic framework to pursue more rights, as well as the Islamic feminism, marked by the growing shift towards more reformist interpretations, that will emerge from Iranian women in the 1990s.

With the election of President Rafsanjani, liberalization, development planning, and gradual shifts in gender policy fostered a steady growth in the “visibility of Islamic feminists, legal strategies for women’s rights by state and independent feminists, and the proliferation of a dynamic feminist press.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The increasing visibility of women was a gradual but noticeable trend in Iran as the mid-1990s saw to the parliamentary election of several women to the Majlis. By 2000, the Iranian parliament included more women, some of which were reformed-minded advocates for more equitable gender relations. More generally, “[i]n 1997 with the election of Mohammad Khatami as President, the political atmosphere relaxed, and a vocal press and a vibrant, if fragile, civil society emerged.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Female parliamentarians began giving speeches attesting to the changing and more assertive attitudes regarding the promotion of women’s status in Iranian society while the formation of nongovernmental organizations dealing with women’s concerns increased dramatically. Iran enjoyed a particularly “lively women’s press” with books, magazines, and women’s studies journals – such as *Zan*, *Zanan*, *Jens-e Dovvom*, and *Farzaneh* – which took on the political, cultural, religious, and social issues most significant to Iranian women.[[45]](#footnote-45) Articles published in the women’s press criticized the subjugation of women in Iran, called for the modernization of family laws, and translated classic feminist essays as well as more recent Western feminist publications.

The system of values concerning women in Iran has further indicated a shift towards gender equality. Mansoor Moaddel’s 1999 survey of value orientations in Egypt, Iran, and Jordan found that, of the three, Iranians placed least emphasis on religion and most on nationalism while also being least concerned about ‘Western cultural invasion.’ The same study found that Iranians had relatively more progressive values concerning working mothers, familial relations, and polygamy. Moaddel concludes that these responses are the result of “the experience of having lived for more than two decades under an Islamic fundamentalist regime.”[[46]](#footnote-46) With the break from the West that the Islamic Republic has tried to implement, Muslim women have retaken center stage in the conversations regarding gender relations in Iran. Working within such a framework has allowed a larger number of Muslim women to challenge the gender rules of their societies.

A coalition of secular and Islamic feminists from the press, film, and academia– including Faezeh Hashemi, Shahla Sherkat, Tahmineh Milani, and Jaleh Shaditalab – have begun to work with reformist male parliamentarians to “contest the codified and institutionalized privileges of men over women.”[[47]](#footnote-47) The female agency rooted in the mobilization of women during the Iranian Revolution and the unintended widespread empowerment of women through policies of Islamization have been integral components to the increasing political participation of women in Iran. The popular Western notions which label Muslim women – and Iranian women especially since Islam if the official state ideology – as submissive, veiled, and voiceless entities are subverted by the growing women’s movement in Iran. The irony is in the fact that “many women today owe their education, their jobs, their economic autonomy, and their public persona, to compulsory hejab” mandated by the Islamic Republic in order to restrict women.[[48]](#footnote-48) The issue of veiling undoubtedly restricts some, but it is pertinent to acknowledge its emancipatory effects within a society which, like all others in their own ways, still struggling with patriarchy. The public sphere remains a male domain and veiling legitimizes the female presence in that domain. Iranian women have then utilized compulsory veiling as a key instrument in taking for themselves a means of subversion whether by exploiting subtle fashion statements with the hijab or by the mere occupation of spaces never intended for them. The 2006 ‘One Million Signatures’ campaign, for instance, has been called “an effort born on the streets” and has been designed by Iranian women to petition the Iranian parliament to reform laws discriminating against women and asks that they be brought up to international human rights standards.[[49]](#footnote-49) While the goal of one million signatures was not achieved, the women involved actively shaped the discourse on women’s rights by relying on face-to-face interactions in public spaces and facing public arrests to raise awareness amongst the general Iranian public. The agency of Iranian women is then undeniable in spite of the limited empowerment that the Islamic Republic affords them.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Shirin Ebadi, for example, was a lawyer prior to the 1979 Revolution, was dismissed and given clerical duties following the revolution, and in 1992 finally succeeded in re-obtaining a lawyer’s license in order to establish her own practice. She used her time of unemployment to write several books and articles regarding Iranian law and, upon receiving her lawyer’s license, accepted to defend national, press-related, and social cases.[[50]](#footnote-50) Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who in 2010 was sentenced to six years in jail, has become renowned in her representation of Iranian opposition activists. Her case garnered the attention of the United States as well as international non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International. In 2013, international pressures resulted in her release from prison. After her release, she began protesting with human and woman’s rights activists outside the Iranian Bar Association to demand the reversal of a three-year ban on her lawyer’s license.[[51]](#footnote-51) The continued participation of Iranian women in the public sphere, especially when regarding laws and government policies, undermines the theocratic, male-dominated society of Iran. Such participation subverts the notion of clearly delineated gender roles that is used to justify the rigid, gender-based social divisions of labor within Iranian society. The increasing healthcare access, educational attainment, and employment opportunities of Iranian women provides further space to challenge the patriarchal models and authoritarian structures which perpetuate the marginalization of women. Islamic feminism in Iran has become a formidable force and symbolizes increasing agency of women seeking better opportunities and greater rights within an Islamic framework.

## Conclusions

Iran is a particularly interesting case to explore the complexities and nuances characterizing gender equality in Muslim societies. The participation of women in revolutionary politics awakened the consciousness of popular-class Iranian women to their political potential while middle-class women, also mobilized during the revolutionary process, began actively promoting women’s rights in Iran. After the revolution, however, “the regime established its control not only through brute force but also through a coherent cultural discourse that demonized feminist accomplishments and linked women’s rights both to notions of ritual impurity and to Western Imperialist designs on the nation.”[[52]](#footnote-52) These restrictions on women have, ironically, given rise to more significant and dynamic female activism within Iran and the Islamic Republic’s break with the West has undermined notions which label this Iranian women’s movement as a form of Western imperialism. The female agency rooted in the mobilization of women during the Iranian Revolution and the unintended widespread empowerment of women through policies of Islamization have been integral components to the increasing political activism of women in Iran. This distinctly Islamic feminism exhibits a formidable sense of agency in Muslim women which challenges the patriarchal views that associate gender inequality with Islam.

The Islamization of Iran has thus ironically resulted in both the marginalization and the empowerment of Iranian women. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic pursued policies contributing to the second-class citizenship of women. On the other hand, –the creation of the Islamic Republic has effectively born a new gender consciousness within its population while simultaneously fostering an environment in which that consciousness is demanded voice. Islamist policies have inadvertently empowered a healthier, better-educated, and more diverse population of Iranian women whose agency was widely mobilized at the very conception of the Islamic Republic, developments which are also central to feminist notions of empowerment. While the religious legacies, historical traditions, and institutional structures within Iran can obstruct gender equality, Iranian women have begun to more actively and assertively voice egalitarian attitudes and are now striving to pursue greater gender equality within the Islamic framework. This Islamic feminism, though complex, appears to be a formidable force within Iran. The generalizations which deem Iranian women submissive, voiceless, and homogenous thus prove to require a greater and more nuanced analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran and of the Muslim world as a whole.

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Figure 1. Gender Inequality in Iran and its Middle Eastern Neighbors

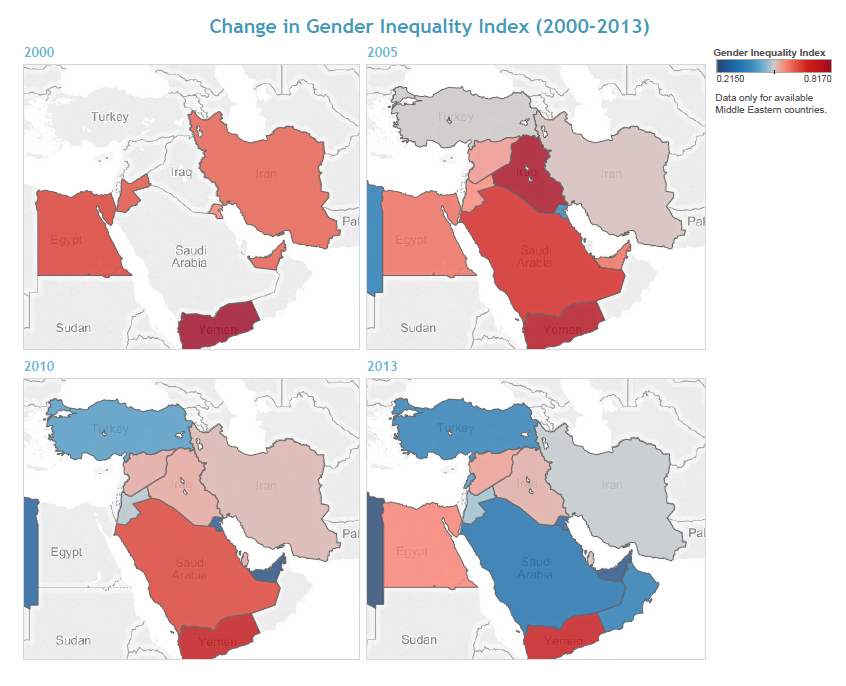
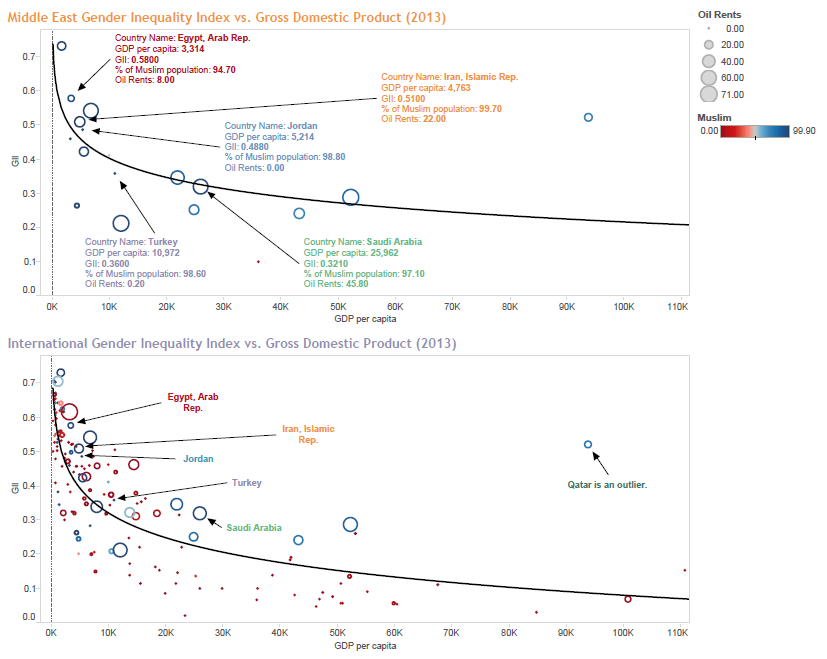


Figure 2. Gender Inequality, Development, Oil Dependency, and Muslim Population



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