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From Bedrooms to Streets: The Rise of a New Generation of Independent Iranian Women

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Abstract

The image of Iran in the global media is that of an ever-expanding authoritarian regime, determined to hold on to its ideological foundations as they were articulated in 1979. However, beneath the surface profound shifts are taking place in Iranian society, particularly in the institution of marriage and sexuality–changes that threaten the core principles of the regime and have substantially weakened its ideological appeal. While the Iranian media presents these changes as highly negative and destructive, in many cases they have also released women from the shackles of outdated notions of "morality" and "propriety," and made it possible for them to emerge as leaders in the unrelenting grassroots protests against the authoritarian regime. This article looks at some of these shifts in the last decade and the ways in which they continue to threaten the ideological fabric of a regime that has built its legitimacy on old notions of justice, gender segregation, family values, and supposed piety and morality.

Keywords

Islamic Republic of Iran, gender politics, women and social change, Iran #MeToo, sex and reproduction

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Introduction[1]

Since the 2009 Green Movement in Iran, the global media have focused on the foreign policies of Iran such as the standoff over the nuclear issue and the US-imposed sanctions, the military expansion of the regime in the Middle East, the growing influence of Russia and China in Iran, or the escalating cyberwar between Iran, Israel, and the United States. With regard to the domestic front, the focus has been on how the regime has dropped any pretense to being an Islamic "Republic," since elections have become utterly meaningless, and citizens have responded by boycotting national elections and showing their frustration through routine mass protests that are then violently suppressed by the state. The image of Iran in the global media is thus of an ever-expanding authoritarian regime, determined to hold on to its ideological foundations as they were articulated in 1979.

However, beneath the surface other profound shifts are taking place in Iranian society, particularly in the institution of marriage and sexuality—changes that threaten the core principles of the regime and have substantially weakened its ideological appeal. These changes have also released women from the shackles of outdated notions of "morality" and "propriety," and made it possible for them to emerge as fearless leaders in the unrelenting grassroots protests against the authoritarian regime. The decline of marriage and the drop in birth rate in Iran mirrors a similar decline happening worldwide, but its impact is far greater there, as it is taking place within a religious authoritarian regime, which claims to protect "traditional Islamic family values." With every decade that goes by, Iranian society inches closer to a breaking point, not just politically but socially and culturally in terms of dramatic changes in attitudes and behaviors toward sex, marriage, and procreation. This article looks at some of these major shifts in the last decade and the ways in which they threaten the ideological fabric of a regime that has built its legitimacy on gender segregation, family values, and supposed piety, morality, and old notions of justice.

A Hybrid Modernity in Marriage and Life Style

In much of the West, the trend toward more companionate marriages in the nineteenth century was followed by legal changes that women fought hard to attain. Initially, the new emphasis on marital love may have increased women's emotional dependence on marriage. But by the late nineteenth century, a growing movement demanded rights for women both inside and outside marriage, rights that enabled them to leave an abusive marriage or decline to enter it. In the twentieth century, the growing participation of women in the economy and the wages they brought home served to promote more egalitarian relations in marriage. Women gained the right to divorce and to

[1] I am grateful to Saeid Madani, whose help in finding the latest statistics for this epilogue was indispensable. Thanks to Masserat Amir Ebrahimi for our lengthy conversations about Iran's social movements and to my sister, Frieda Afary, who shared her decades-long research on Iranian social movements with me. In writing this epilogue, I have drawn on some of the discussions in my *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, though the material has been thoroughly updated to cover the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

custody of their children, as well as to share in community property. This process also made marriage more optional and divorce more acceptable. The numbers of married couples continued to decrease, but those who remained married generally experienced greater satisfaction in their relationships. In addition, more and more children were also born by choice outside marriage to women in their thirties, many college-educated and professionals. In 2016, in the United States, around 40% of children were born to unmarried women, usually in a cohabiting relationship with a man.[2]

In the same period in Iran, marriage remained the norm, and the child-centered institution of marriage endured for the vast majority. But the lives of Iranian women and men had changed dramatically since the mid-nineteenth century. In 2016, literacy rates had gone up substantially for both girls (84.2%) and boys (91%). By 2019, the mean age at first marriage for women had also gone up to 24.8 (from 19.7 in 1976), and more than 67.4% married after the age of 20. In the same year, greater education and the availability of birth control resulted in a drastic drop in fertility rates to 1.7 in 2019 and 1.6 in 2021. Thus, Iran once again proved the inverted relationship between fertility and female literacy levels; that is, the higher the literary rates, the lower the fertility rates. [3] As women became pregnant later and better health services were available to them, families became smaller, and infant (less than one year old) mortality rates dropped to 7.7 per 1,000 live births.[4]

Iranian women also made astonishing gains in education. According to a 2012 UNESCO report, around 70% of science and engineering students of Iran were women. Despite the much larger population of Russia (144 million) and the United States (330 million), Iran (84 million), ranked third in total engineering degrees granted annually and first in female engineering graduates. [5] Other numbers were equally impressive. According to a UNESCO survey in 2012, "Over 2 million out of 4 million students in tertiary education in Iran were females, thus marking the fifth largest female enrollment after China, India, US and Brazil." The report also confirmed that Iranian female graduates in the sciences ranked second in the world, after the United States.[6]

However, under the Islamist state, women continued to have far fewer personal legal rights than men, and their position inside and outside matrimony remained highly precarious. In the same

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[2] Wildsmith, Manlove, and Cook, "Dramatic Increase in the Proportion of Births Outside of Marriage."

[3] See Ladier-Fouladi, "The Islamic Republic of Iran's New Population Policy and Recent Changes in Fertility." She points out that there was a small temporary increase in fertility between 2012 and 2015 in response to generous government subsidies and other unsustainable measures. Information also based on email exchange with Saeid Madani, December 15, 2021.

[4] National Organization for Civil Registration, *Population Statistical Yearbooks*.

[5] Parhami, "Women in Science and Engineering." See also the full report here: "Top 10 Countries that Produce the Most Engineers." https://www.embibe.com/exams/top-10-countries-that-produce-the-most-engineers/?fbclid=IwAR2f11NU375h6mXk2X47ULuHtnF2e8PEQ4DikFVRBpakMN3r1uE8m_erM1U.

[6] "Iranian Women in Science and Tech."

year, when Iranian women ranked first globally in several STEM fields, the government deliberately restricted their participation by denying them admission into 77 fields of study at 33 public universities.

Many patriarchal laws continue to blatantly control women's lives. Fathers can still legally arrange marriages for their daughters before age thirteen, with court permission, and some continue to do so in isolated rural areas. Husbands can still have veto power over their wives' occupations. They can prevent them from visiting friends or traveling abroad. Men can also decide unilaterally on the couple's place of residence. Women experience denial of child custody and destitution if divorced. Husbands purchase property in their own name, and the law does not provide for community property rights, which meants that what the husband acquires in the course of the marriage belongs only to him.

A woman still faces the possibility of sharing her husband with a second wife. In 2008, despite vocal opposition by women's rights groups and liberal clerics, such as Ayatollah Sanaʿi, Parliament further recognized the right of a man to take a second wife. The Ahmadinejad government and the conservative Eighth Parliament encouraged an increase in polygamy as a solution to pervasive female unemployment. The Family Protection Law of 1975, which was enacted before the Islamic Revolution, had required the first wife's permission for the husband's second marriage. Ahmadinajad and other conservatives wanted to eliminate this portion of the law in an attempt to facilitate polygamy. But they faced a huge protest by leading advocates of women's rights and had to back off.[7]

At the same time, new laws have made it more difficult for wives to leave an abusive marriage. Since there is no community property, wives who have spent their lives raising children are at great financial disadvantage if the marriage comes to an end, as sometimes happens when the husband decides to take a second wife. In such cases, the major asset of the first wife after divorce would be her *mahriyeh*,[8] which was negotiated at the time of her marriage. But in 2007, in response to angry husbands and their relatives, the judiciary introduced a new prenuptial agreement, one that conditioned the payment of *mahriyeh* upon a man's financial ability, thus closing off one of the last favorable aspects of the sharia for women.[9] In 2015, the number of men who were imprisoned due to nonpayment of *mahriyeh* reached over four thousand. Three years later, the Chief Justice issued a circular that ordered judges to refrain from imprisoning husbands for nonpayment of *mahriyeh*.

Another measure aimed at controlling women and preventing them from large-scale participation in society is the elimination of sex education programs in schools and various birth control policies that had been introduced three decades earlier in the early years of the revolution.

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[7] "Lāyeheh"; Tohidi, "Iranian Women's Rights Activists Are Being Smeared," and "Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran."

[8] A fixed amount that the husband promises to pay his wife in the event of divorce or his death.

[9] "Jozveh-ye Hoquqi."

In 2012 family planning centers stopped providing free contraceptives to couples, and in 2014 Parliament forbade practices such as vasectomy for men and tubal ligation for women, operations which had been free a decade earlier.[10] In fall of 2021, the state called for punitive measures to control pregnancy. Even though the Islamic Republic itself had introduced the new birth control programs of the late 1980s, the state now argued that family planning was a malicious plot designed by the West to bring about the collapse of the Muslim population of Iran.[11]

And yet despite all these limitations, attitudes about love and marriage and the institution of marriage have continued to evolve. Young men and women continue to consult and negotiate with parents about prospective partners, but marriage increasingly has become a prerogative of individual choice. No longer seen as mainly an institution for procreation, marriage now offers women possibilities for companionship, including emotional and sexual intimacy. Love is celebrated loudly and passionately. Valentine's Day has become a major celebration, and couples take ads in popular journals, expressing their eternal devotion for one another. Society as a whole is far less accepting of husbands who engage in covert male bisexuality; the tradition of openly maintaining young boy concubines has disappeared, and pedophilia is now considered a huge moral transgression. Urban and rural youth form friendships in public areas, universities, and workplaces despite Islamist prohibitions against the mingling of unrelated men and women. Virtual social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, have become a sphere where women and men interact more freely and embrace global conventions of socializing. At the same time, women face many new risks associated with social media interactions such as censorship, online sexual harassment, or cybercrime.[12]

But some traditions have not altered as much. Concerns about ritual purity have not entirely disappeared. In some conservative pockets of society, pregnant women can only be cared for by female obstetricians and gynecologists. Some men and women continue to believe in separate gender spheres and adhere to the belief that sexual experience taints a woman. It is as if the semen, once having entered her body, irrevocably marks her as impure. A married woman's sexual life pleases her husband and produces legitimate children, but the sexual activities of single, divorced, or widowed women are constant sources of anxiety. The frequent use of terms such as cleanliness or purity (*paki; pakdamani*) with regard to women also indicates the persistence of such thinking within Iranian culture. Of course, Iranians were not unique in clinging to such views about sexual purity, which appeared in different guises in various religions and cultures.[13]

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[10] Ladier-Fouladi, "Islamic Republic of Iran's New Population Policy," 919, 925.

[11] "Tarh-e 'Javāni."

[12] Golzard and Miguel, "Negotiating Intimacy Through Social Media."

[13] In some parts of the United States, legal prohibitions against miscegenation (interracial sex) had continued well into the era of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, while a substantial sector of American public opinion remained opposed long after that.

Even with this mind-set, some attitudes have shifted. As in Europe and the United States decades earlier greater access to automobiles has afforded more privacy. For young people who have no place of their own, residing either with their families or in dorms, the automobile has revolutionized intimate relations. A young woman can now spend time with her boyfriend, either inside the car or at a destination that is far from her domicile, yet close enough to leave and return on the same day, without drawing much attention from her community. This has allowed more women to become sexually active before marriage.

Among the more cosmopolitan middle classes, virginity is no longer crucial. Even in some conservative circles, young women negotiate to have premarital sex that maintains virginity or have access to safe but expensive hymenoplasty.[14] Many parents in middle-class families accept these facts, but are more accepting for sons than daughters. Despite its illegality, even cohabitation among romantically involved, but unmarried urban young people, has gained a degree of social acceptance in more cosmopolitan areas, a phenomenon that is called "white marriage." The government is aware of such cohabitation, but is unable to prevent it. Such unions pose severe challenges to the theocratic regime, but the government has to be satisfied with harsh verbal condemnations and threats.[15]

What Do New Religious Reformists Say about Cohabitation?

Both inside Iran and in the diaspora, the calls for gender equality have continued to grow. Although laws remain the same, Iranian society is gradually moving toward greater recognition of gender equality. Some theological reforms have initiated from the safety of diaspora by a new generation of religious thinkers living in Europe, the United States, and Canada, who began to address highly provocative gender concerns through social media that were accessible in Iran. Mohsen Kadivar, a *mojtahed* who completed his theological studies in Iran and gained the right to issue fatwas on religious matters, was disrobed and forced into exile. But from the safety of the United States, he continues to give frequent lectures in which he argues that Quranic verses that uphold patriarchal views—in fact any religious edict that discriminates on the basis of gender, color, race, class, religion, or political ideology—are in his view "indefensible and unjustified" and can be discarded. Soroush Dabbagh, psychotherapist and son of the leading theologian Abdolkarim Soroush, has placed great emphasis on love and empathy in his lectures on Clubhouse, a social media platform that has become widely popular in Iran. In his view, our ethical responsibility to others comes before our search for an abstract truth. The centrality of love in any relationship means we should recognize "white marriages." Although these consensual, heterosexual cohabitations are still illegal, they are ethically committed

[14] Azal Ahmadi, "Recreating Virginity in Iran: Hymenoplasty as a Form of Resistance."

[15] Gholam Reza Vatandoust and Maryam Sheipari, "Beyond the Sharia: 'White Marriage' in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

relations and, he argues, worthy of recognition by the community. These pronouncements on gender and women's rights have broken some of the strongest taboos in Iranian society and suggest a major shift in public thinking—not just in diaspora but in many sectors inside Iran.[16]

The Evolution of Temporary Marriage

The institution of temporary marriage has also evolved and become more consensual, largely due to shifts in attitudes about what constitutes sinful behavior. In such unions husbands and wives ware now closer in age. A couple in their thirties might enter into a temporary marriage, one that has religious blessing, and hope for a more enduring union. For some in the more religious segment of society, temporary marriage has replaced Western-style cohabitation. However, some men continue to use temporary marriage to engage in polygamy. There remains no official statistics on the number of temporary marriages in Iran, since temporary marriage does not always have to be registered, unless the couple wishes to do so, or the wife becomes pregnant. But according to the Chief Director of the Social Problems Office of Iran, for every ten formal marriages, there were two registered temporary marriages.[17]

Historically, temporary marriage was identified with child marriage, as many who entered such relations were minors. In the new Iranian society, child marriage has substantially decreased but has not disappeared. A recent national survey found that 82% of young people oppose temporary marriage when it involves underage people. In 2019, the number of married girls who were under eighteen was estimated at around 140,275 (26.4% of all marriages). These numbers somewhat increased in 2021 as a result of the severe economic situation, coupled with the COVID-19 epidemic, which devastated the poor nationwide.[18]

The New Single Woman

The delay in marriage, growing divorce rates, and the growing reluctance of some women to get married has gradually led to the emergence of a new generation of independent, urban, middle-class women in Tehran and other large cities. These women gain their independence through higher education and work. They often live alone or outside the conventional norms of the traditional family.

Women who went to school in the 1960s and 1970s were adults at the time of the 1979 revolution, and continued to struggle for their rights after the revolution. Commonly referred to as "the First Generation," they are secular, middle-class women who experienced unprecedented changes in their public and private lives during the 1970s. Some went to college, entered the job market, and became the first in their families to experience economic independence. As a rebellious generation, these women were active participants in the early stages of the 1979 revolution and fought for the overthrow of the monarchy with the hope of establishing a more democratic

[16] J. Afary, "Rowshan Fekrān-e Dini [New Religious Thinkers] and the Institution of Velāyat-e Faqih."

[17] "Āmār-e"; Aghajanian, "Recent Trends of Marriage in Iran."

[18] National Organization for Civil Registration. *Population Statistical Yearbooks.*

government. After the formation of the Islamic Republic, women from this generation faced many new restrictions on their rights and in their daily lives. However, through time, they learned how to resist and overcome some of these limitations.

The "Second Generation," those who were children and teenagers during the early years of the revolution, experienced enormous hardship, which they quietly endured, and are commonly referred to as the "burned out generation." Forty years after the revolution, however, members of the "Third Generation," those who were born after the revolution and have no personal recollection of the prerevolutionary era, have become new social actors. They are more educated than their mothers and grandmothers and more active. They also have greater awareness of their rights as a result of exposure to global norms. As a result, they have begun altering society and the structure of family—sometimes by postponing marriage, by living alone, or by living outside the conventional norms of the traditional family.[19]

Changes in Rural and Tribal Communities

In the rural southeastern provinces of Baluchestan and Sistan, where families are still large, and the burden of practicing birth control falls entirely on the wife, parents still arrange temporary marriages for their daughters before they are eighteen as a way of reducing their own financial burden. But there are also significant cultural changes in some rural and tribal sectors. As rates of urbanization have dramatically increased, many formerly rural areas have become suburbs of Iran's large cities, while access to amenities and better means of transportation and communication has brought changes to other rural and tribal areas. These factors have impacted the politics of marriage and family relations. Arranging a marriage, negotiating the contract, and celebrating the union have remained highly popular, but in practice these are increasingly expensive endeavors. In cash-strapped formerly tribal communities, which have now joined the middle classes, people's criteria for spousal selection and couples' expectations of a good life exceed their financial resources. While young people are more educated, marriy later, and have become more active in choosing their spouses, and while young women in particular hold higher expectations from their husbands in marriage, for many people marriage has become economically difficult to attain and fraught with potential pitfalls. Parents still consider the marriage of their children to be a supreme duty of theirs, and this encourages their efforts to make it possible.

However, marriage is no longer a taken-for-granted step in the life cycle that is followed by a more-or-less functional partnership. As Mary Hegland and Erika Friedl have shown, marriage has diversified into additional possible images, practices, choices, and pressures. It has become a realm replete with complications, conflicts, and paradoxes—but also with potentially greater possibilities for companionship and intimacy. Young people want to receive

[19] Amir-Ebrahimi and Huffschmid, "Uncertain Cities."

full economic support from their families, yet they also want to live independent lives. As birth rates fall, and as couples move away from in-laws and set up their own residences, care for the elderly has become problematic, especially since the state does not provide adequate alternative measures.[20]

Among the Bakhtiari tribes of Iran, whose members reside near Khuzestan, south Lorestan, and Isfahan, education and employment have broken down the cast-like social structures within tribes and allowed for intermarriages between more established and marginal tribes, something which was hitherto taboo. As a result of the revolution, tribes that were marginal and considered inferior to the more established and respectable ones have gained access to greater education, jobs, land, and power—including greater authority within the institutions of the Islamic Republic. These changes have increased the self-esteem of marginal tribes and gradually elevated their social class in the eyes of the more established ones. As a result, the community is witnessing a greater number of intermarriages between the established and marginal tribes, particularly when a young man or woman of a marginal tribe has accumulated both economic and social capital by virtue of becoming a highly respected professional in Iranian society.[21]

Transsexuality Maybe, but Not Yet Homosexuality

In the West, the gradual adoption of normative heterosexuality was followed by the slow acceptance of adult homosexuality. Even so, homosexuality remained a hugely controversial issue. Gay rights influenced presidential elections in the United States and Europe, and opposition to it became an emblem of the religious right. In Iran, heterosexuality has become the norm, but a gay lifestyle is often neither acknowledged nor accepted. Within small circles in Tehran and other cities, a small gay subculture has emerged, one that struggles for greater recognition. Jón Ingvar Kjaran, who examined the complicated embodied experiences of gay-identifying men in Iran, has written about how these men carved out meaning in their lives. This is no easy task for these individuals, who have endured both the official homophobic discourses of the state and the personal traumas, caused by family and society. There are regional and class differences within Iranian society with regard to its tolerance of a gay life style. While many conservative communities of Iran disavow homosexuality and demonize same-sex desire, there are gay/queer spaces in Tehran and some other large urban areas where resistance can manifest itself in a variety of forms, and where semi-open intimacy can take place.[22] From time to time, the Islamist state has arrested gay men, charging them with rape and

[20] Friedl, "How Marriage Changed in Boir Ahmad"; Hegland, "Changing Perceptions and Practices of Marriage."

[21] Alikhani, "Changing Established-Outsider Relations?"

[22] Jón Ingvar Kjaran, *Gay Life Stories: Same-Sex Desires in Post-Revolutionary Iran.*

pedophilia, thereby ensuring a lack of public sympathy for them.

Iranian society is not yet ready to accept a modern gay lifestyle, but is incrementally becoming sympathetic toward the difficult lives of transsexuals, since the state recognizes the possibility of being transsexual (and eventually having a sex-change operation), but not being gay. A play by Sanaz Bayan called *Blue Inclined to Pink* (2017), about the lives of several trans women and men, was on stage in Tehran for four months. It became a national sensation, garnering tens of thousands of sympathetic viewers in its original theatrical production and later documentary adaptations that are available on YouTube (search "Ābee Māyel be Surati" 2017).

Risky Sex, Unhappy Marriages, and Divorce

Some social indicators suggest a grim picture, with exceedingly high rates of unprotected sex, marital unhappiness, unemployment, prostitution, drug addiction, and suicide. Although premarital sex is becoming more common among urban youth, this change has impacted young women and men very differently. Young women are neither adequately protected by law from sexual molestation and rape, nor are they exposed to strong, healthy feminist frameworks that would allowed them to develop a sense of personal autonomy. As Norma Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi have pointed out, this is an "Iranian sexual liberation on masculine terms."[23]

A similar situation prevails within marriage. As women become more convinced of the importance of their emotional and sexual needs, and find themselves seldom satisfied in marriages that are still marked by blatant gender inequality, they search desperately for a way out. Greater longevity and better health actually contribute to this increase in relative unhappiness.

By 2019, general life expectancy was 73.3 years for men and 76.5 for women, which meant that marriages might last fifty years or longer. Marital conflicts contribute to high levels of mental disorder among women, who have far fewer rights in marriage or divorce. A number of studies have consistently shown that rates of mental disorder are significantly higher among women than among men. The rate of psychiatric disorders for men between the ages of 18 and 64 is estimated to be at 20.8%; for women of the same age group, it is estimated to be at 26.5%.[24]

At the 2005 annual meeting of the Iranian Sociological Association, Hussein Aghajani reported that, given the opportunity, 50% of Iranian women would file for divorce. He attributed this increased unhappiness to increased levels of education among women, the decreasing influence of the extended family, fewer children, and the growing desire for intimacy and companionship in marriage. Of course, if they were to be

[23] Moruzzi and Sadegh, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire," 28.

[24] Rahimi-Moaghar, Amin-Esmāeili, Sharifi, Motevasselian, Hajebi, Rād-Goodarzi, et al., *The Overall Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders in Iran*.

acted upon, such inclinations toward divorce would require a host of favorable concomitant circumstances for women, such as steady employment, financial security, and the ability to gain custody of their children.[25] As a result, despite laws that make female-initiated divorce extremely difficult, urban divorce rates have continued to increase. According to the National Organization for Civil Registration (2020), in 2019 the average national rate of divorce was 330.9 per 1,000 marriages, or almost 1 in every 3 marriages.

In the absence of adequate employment opportunities for women, even among the more educated urban middle classes, women who desire financial security and emotional and sexual compatibility sometimes resort to a rebellious and dangerous marital strategy in order to have both. A young woman from an urban middle-class family with low prospects would accept the marriage offer of her wealthiest (and usually most conventional and oldest) suitor, and would negotiate a large *mahriyeh*. A month after the wedding, however, she would sue for her *mahriyeh*. In response, the government enacted new measures to stop the spread of such practices. Among them were placing limits on the amount of *mahriyeh* (no more than fourteen gold coins). Still, resourceful and well-to-do families have continued to find a way around these regulations, such as requiring the groom to purchase a property in the name of their daughter before the marriage is finalized.

In the industrialized world, more educated women who found steady employment and financial security began to opt out of dysfunctional marriages by the late twentieth century.[26] Social statistics seem to confirm a similar trend for Iran. In 2001, more women (nearly 40%) than men (35%) initiated petitions for divorce.[27] However, since well-paid jobs for women are difficult to find, and Iranian society as a whole remains intolerant of young divorcées, many women feel they have no choice but to remain in unhappy and even violent marriages. Others, faced with crushing inflation rates, especially after 2018, when US sanctions were reimposed on Iran, have returned to their family of origin or live with other single women.

Unemployment, Underemployment, and Emigration

Unemployment rates for both men and women continue to escalate. The percentage of women in the paid labor force remains exceedingly low (18%) compared to other Muslim nations, such as Turkey (more than 25%) or Indonesia (more than 38%). These statistics do not include Iranian women's participation in mostly unpaid rural and nomadic agriculture. The low rate of paid employment for women stems from government policies that flagrantly discriminate against women. With regard to employment in both the public and private sectors, married men with children are given priority, followed by married men without children, and lastly married

[25] "Taqyir-e Sabk-e Zendegi"; Ezazi, "Khoshunat-e Khānevādegi Bāztāb-e Sakhtar-e Ejtemā."

[26] Stephanie Coontz, *How Love Conquered Marriage*, 252–62.

[27] Madani-Ghahfarokhi, "Gendered Impacts of Declining Social Capital."

women with children. If there are no married applicants, then single men are given priority over single women.[28]

The impediments to women's work are not just economic. Young, educated women continue to have great employment ambitions, but married women are still expected by their families and communities to devote themselves entirely to family responsibilities, making it difficult for them to reenter the work force. As more women graduate from college, and as inflation rates massively increase, we should see more married women joining the labor force. However, low employment opportunities have led to vast unemployment and underemployment, a situation where highly qualified women are forced to work in low-paying and low-skilled jobs.[29]

Still many entrepreneurial women have ways to make a living. They run their own informal businesses, such as in-house restaurants, hair and beauty salons, as well cleaning, catering, and tailoring businesses. Others work as waitresses, fitness and yoga instructors, or provide after-school tutoring in the arts and languages. Many young women from the "Third Generation" hold multiple jobs. They might offer yoga classes in the morning, work as waitresses in the afternoon, and run a small tourist agency on weekends and evenings.[30]

Pervasive unemployment has pushed many young educated men to emigrate abroad, which has decreased the number of socially and financially qualified men available for marriage. Iran had one of the highest "brain drains" in the world in the early twenty-first century. Emigration rates increased by a factor of 2.3 from 1990 to 2020. Each year, 100,000–250,000 educated young people leave the country, and many choose not to return. Indeed, the state encourages emigration to ease unemployment and political frustrations. Those who migrate often leave for countries that are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Among them, 65% were reported to have had a university degree, while 30% were specialists in their career groups. A Gallup Institute study shows that Iran's score in the potential migration flow index, youth migration index, and talent absorption index, are all negative and has decreased from -13 in 2012 to -16 in 2017.[31] This means that if immigration restrictions were lifted in Iran, the number of young, educated adults leaving the country would be far greater than the number of that group entering the country.

Runaway Girls, Drug Addicts, AIDS, and Suicide

The confluence of high unemployment, inflation, emigration, and idealistic expectations about marriage have led to an increase in risky behaviors, especially among young women, significant numbers of whom have fallen

[28] Ladier-Fouladi, "Islamic Republic of Iran's New Population Policy," 925.

[29] Zafaranchi, "Investigating the Pattern of Women's Economic Participation in the Labor Market."

[30] Amir-Ebrahimi, "The Emergence of Independent Women in Iran: A Generational Perspective," 26.

[31] *Potential Net Migration Index* (Gallup poll).

into prostitution, drug addiction, or committed suicide.

The number of young women who ran away from home continued to increase after the year 2000. Many left, hoping to find a companionate marriage. Instead, alone and destitute, they became prostitutes and drug addicts, and joined the growing sex industry in the large cities and the Persian Gulf emirates. The head of the Social Emergency Section of Iran's Welfare Organization announced that in the first half of 2018, more than three thousand girls ran away from home.[32] Runaway girls are often abused. They enter the street life cycle and are exposed to great danger, since criminal gangs exploit and manipulate these vulnerable girls. Many are fleeing abusive homes. A study by S. Mohammadkhani showed that 44% of runaway girls were sexually abused by family members, while 73% of the girls reported that their families paid little attention to their emotional needs.[33] Another study showed that more than 60% of runaway girls had major fights with their families, while another 60% said one member of their family had been a drug user.[34]

Prostitution continues to involve adult women, girls, and boys. Nearly a quarter of those entering prostitution have done so through short-term temporary marriages. Often state authorities are complicit in promoting prostitution. Some government officials directly benefit from the sex trade, and several police raids on brothels have revealed the involvement of local officials and security officers.[35] General Reza Zarei, Tehran's Chief of Police, and a strong enforcer of morality regulations on the streets, was himself a client of prostitutes and caught *in flagrante delicto* during a police raid in 2008.[36]

Newspapers and tabloid periodicals publish sensational accounts of girls sold into brothels across the border into Pakistan, Afghanistan, Dubai, and elsewhere.[37] Other runaways become sex workers in the religious centers of Mashhad, Qom, Najaf, and Karbala, usually operating under the guise of temporary marriage partners. In press interviews, the girls do not divulge sexual molestation at home. Instead, they report that they left home to escape strict parents who refused to accept modern gender norms, or because they were attracted by the allure of city life. The Iranian public, however, often sees the runaway phenomenon as a product of the breakdown of the patriarchal family structure, widespread unemployment, and the easy availability of drugs.

Illegal narcotics has become big business. Drug traffickers traditionally use Iran as a transit point between Afghanistan, Europe, and the Persian

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[32] Sapa-DPA 2002; Madani-Ghahfarokhi et al., in press, and email exchange with Madani-Ghahfarokhi on December 15, 2021.

[33] Mohammadkhāni, "Effective Social and Mental Factors."

[34] Masoudnia and Fallah, "Study of Socio-Family Factors Affecting Girls."

[35] Hughes, "Islamic Republic's Sex Scandal"; "Child Prostitution Ring."

[36] Sigarchi, "Hashtād Shaki-ye Sardar Zare'i."

[37] Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*.

Gulf. In 2009, the United Nations announced that Iran had the highest drug use rate in the world. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, 15% of the world's drugs were used in Iran.[38] In 2015 it was estimated that about 2,204,000 Iranians had used drugs in the week before the survey was taken. Also, about 4,400,000 people admitted to having had a history of drug abuse. The drug trade remains very lucrative for the traffickers.

In 2015 the total cost of traded drugs was estimated at $5 billion, which was equivalent to 13.4% of the country's GDP that year. Comparison of drug costs from 2004 to 2015 shows that the total expenditure on drugs was more than fifteen times greater in 2015 than it had been in 2004. It is estimated that the amount of direct expenditure on drugs might reach more than $3 billion in 2025.[39] Many Iranians are convinced that the state is heavily involved in the drug traffic. For their part, young people claim that they use illicit drugs because of boredom and the lack of entertainment.[40]

Prostitution, alcoholism, and intravenous drug use contribute to an increase in the rates of HIV/AIDS. Initially, attempts to curb the spread of the virus were inefficient because the state refused to adopt measures that interfered with men's sexual pleasure. According to the country's top AIDS specialist Dr. Hamid Ahmadi, the government reached out to the intravenous drug users but "piously ignored the danger posed by a recent rise in prostitution and casual sex," including temporary marriage.[41] Married women contracted the HIV virus from their husbands, but the state did not publicize this fact, though it did call for greater use of condoms.[42] Today, the situation has changed. Although the use of alcohol remains officially banned, both governmental and nongovernmental institutes, modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, have been established in large and small cities to provide mental and social support for alcoholics and drug users.[43] The Association of Anonymous Addicts in Iran is one of the largest such associations in the world. This nongovernmental organization currently has about forty thousand branches throughout Iran. In 2021 the association held twenty-four thousand weekly meetings and had about three hundred and fifty branches dedicated to women in cities and even in villages.[44]

Suicide rates have increased continuously between 2000 and 2020. The three western provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah, and Hamedan have historically had the highest rates of suicide

[38] Madani-Ghahfarokhi, *Sociology of Addiction in Iran*.

[39] Musharrafi, *Drug Use Economics*.

[40] Vick, "Opiates of the Iranian People"; "Iran Tops World Addiction-Rate List."

[41] Bellaigue, "New Man in Iran."

[42] Meisami, "Zanān-e Irani az Showhareshān AIDS Migirand"; Marashi, "Mobārezeh ba HIV/AIDS"

[43] See, for example, the newsletter of the Anjoman-e Alcolihā-ye Gomnām [Society of Alcoholics Anonymous]: https://etiad.org/community/alcoholics-anonymous/ Retrieved on 5 February 2022.

[44] "Anjoman-e Motādān-e Gomnām-e Iran." 14 Tir 1397/2018. https://na-iran.org/دسته%E2%80%8Cنشده-بندی-تاریخچه/انجمن-معتادان-گمنام-در-کشور-ای/.

since the revolution.[45] The total number of suicides in early 2001 was 2,840. By 2017, it was 4,627. Of those, 3,262 were men, and 1,365 were women. [46] The growing rate of female suicide, especially by self-immolation, is another grim response to the continuing gender apartheid. Many of these women are rural and urban teenagers who are deeply unhappy with their life choices. Others are rural, married women in violent or otherwise unhappy marriages.[47]

The Roots of Iran's Economic and Social Problems

What are the reasons for these colossal economic and social problems? Iran is a rich, oil-producing country. At the turn of the twenty-first century, high oil prices briefly allowed the government to spend more on domestic social programs, but these expenditures have contributed little to economic development, let alone job creation. The state has awarded large contracts to members of the Pasdaran and Basij in exchange for their political backing. At the same time, growing internal consumption, aging production facilities, and US-imposed sanctions have limited Iran's capacity to export oil.[48]

To be sure, the sanctions placed by the United States, which were reimposed during the presidency of Donald Trump, have greatly increased the suffering of the Iranian people. Although many Iranian economists see rampant corruption and mismanagement of the economy as more important factors, the suffering of people of Iran also stems from the aggressive foreign policies of the "military-industrial-theocratic" complex led by the Revolutionary Guards and Supreme Leader Khamenei. In 2020, some 80 % of Iran's economy (including oil and gas) was under the control of the Revolutionary Guards, which has become the principal employer of Iran, and maybe even the real overlord of the nation, albeit under the nominal leadership of Khamenei. In the late 1970s, Fred Haliday called the Pahlavi regime's regional aspirations "subimperial."[49] By 2020 Iran was acting as a regional Shi'i imperialist power in the Middle East, vying for influence from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and Palestine (and access to the Mediterranean Sea), and further south in the Persian Gulf Emirates and Yemen (and access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden), as well as parts of East Africa. Iranian officials readily admit that they have spent 30 billion dollars on military interventions in Syria alone. Independent scholars have estimated that Iran's military engagement in Syria has included ten thousand paid mercenaries,

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45 Mohammadi, Mousavi, Akhlaghi, Darabi, Solaimani, and Arghavani, "Epidemiological Study of Suicide."

46 Throughout the world women are more likely to attempt suicide, whereas men are more likely to succeed. The difference is attributed to the methods chosen. Men often select violent methods that are highly successful; women often overdose, which has a lower rate of success.

47 Amiri, "Ilam Sarzamin-e Zanān-e Sho'lehvar," 11; "Khodsuzi."

48 Mouawad, "West Adds to Strains on Iran's Lifeline"; "Iran: Ahmadi-Nejad's Tumultuous Presidency," 11; "Iran Sanctions."

49 Haliday, "The Iranian Revolution."

many from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon.[50]

These figures do not include the massive amounts Iran had spent on propping up Hezbollah in Lebanon since the early 1980s and what Iran has spent in Iraq to encourage a "clientelist sectarian Shi'a-led regime." True, these military incursions were made possible after the colossally misguided US military invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Ba'thist regime in Iraq, which opened the Iran-Iraq border to Iran's direct intervention.[51] But they are not the reason why Iran claims to represent not just the people of the "Shi'i crescent" but the entire oppressed population of the region and the world.[52] All of these funds could have been spent on improving the lives of the Iranian people, creating jobs, and helping to transition Iran to a future "green" economy.

Women's Role in Public Protests of the Twenty-First Century

The continuing protests and demonstrations we witness in Iran are the public's response to these expansionist policies, the colossal favoritism and corruption of the government, and a belligerent foreign policy that has isolated Iran and contributed to extremely high inflation. Iranian women have been part of every major social protest in the fourth decade of the Islamic Republic and often are seen at the forefront of these protests. The dramatic shifts in gender relations and family formations discussed in this epilogue are clear evidence that Iranian women are no longer the submissive beings whose lives revolve around having multiple pregnancies and tending to the needs of husbands and in-laws. As women have gained control of their reproduction and chosen to delay marriage or to not get married at all, and as they have fewer children or chosen to have no children, they are also joining the social protests in larger numbers. But in this latest chapter of their activism, we see women fighting alongside men for their common goals, such as education, jobs, and human rights, and fighting specifically for women's rights issues. Moreover, they are gradually assuming leadership roles in mass national protests and interjecting feminist concerns

[50] Lobel, "Is Iran Paying Afghan Mercenaries?"; Peterson, "Iran Steps Up Recruitment of Shiite Mercenaries."

[51] F. Afary, "The Iranian Uprising of 2019–2020," 142.

[52] Iran also made the removal of US sanctions more difficult by its continued calls for the annihilation of Israel, which discouraged the United States and European countries from lifting the sanctions on Iran and led to weekly cyberwars between Iran and Israel that have continued to escalate. Fereydoun Majlesi, who served as diplomat in both the Pahlavi and the early Islamic Republic eras, and whose views on Iran's foreign policy are popular among Iranian political scientists, has pointed out that "the animosity of the Islamic regime in Iran is because of American support of Israel's aggression against Palestinians, and on the American side it is because of Iran's extremist slogans against the existence of Israel!!" In Majlesi's view, two things could de-escalate the tension: Iran could stop calling for the destruction of Israel and instead agree that "the legal rights of the Palestinian people be granted according to the United Nations Security Council resolutions and compensation paid," and Iran could remove its forces from Syria and instead ask for "access to the Syrian ports on the Mediterranean Sea through Iraq." Then the nuclear conflict would be resolved more easily, because these two issues are the primary reasons hampering the resolution of the conflict (Mitev, "Extremists Did Not Allow").

into broader social and economic grievances.

As sociologist Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi has argued, these protests are sometimes individual or group protests with well-defined social and political goals. At other times, they are "non-movements," made evident when citizens express their opposition to the Islamic theocracy through a life style that breaks with entrenched social, political, and cultural conventions of the state and society.[53] The changes we have discussed so far fall into this second category. When young women turn the obligatory drab hijab into a colorful fashion statement that minimally covers their hair; when urban women engage in premarital sex; when a couple ignores the draconian regulations about gender segregation and simply cohabit; or when Iranians in all walks of life bring "ritually impure" dogs into their homes and parade them during daily walks, they are all breaking some of the most entrenched rules of ritual purity in Shi'i-Iranian culture—regulations that have been the supposed raison d'être of the Islamic Republic since its foundation in 1979.

But Iranian society has also been the scene of extensive goal-oriented protests and demonstrations in the last decade. Participants have included broad sectors of the Iranian working class, women and men, mostly young, as well as "employed and unemployed workers, students, teachers, healthcare workers, retirees, those who have lost their savings in failed financial institutions, political prisoners, and the families of political prisoners. They include members of various oppressed national minorities, such as Arabs, Kurds, Lurs, and Azarbaijanis, as well as persecuted religious minorities, such as Baha'is and Sufis."[54]

Individual Protests and Social Media

Some of these protests are individual ones that have received wide media coverage. Some are group campaigns, led by feminist lawyers, and target specific unjust laws and practices. Others are mass protests, which have brought hundreds of thousands of people, both men and women, to the streets. As Amir Ebrahimi has noted, the newest form of resistance is an "individual, impermanent, and short-term action which is very dependent on social media to spread and multiply it in different times and spaces, enabling it to have some effect on society" for a significant time *after* the action itself has ended.[55]

In 2014 journalist Massih Alinejad launched a Facebook page from exile called My Stealthy Freedom. She invited Iranian women to post pictures of themselves without a hijab. The page quickly garnered international attention and became the site of hundreds of such images. Others followed suit inside Iran, despite enormous personal danger to themselves and their families. On December 27, 2017, Vida Movahed, a young woman, tied her hijab to a stick, stood on top of a utility box on the busy Revolution Avenue, and waved it to the crowd protesting the compulsory hijab.

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[53] Amir-Ebrahimi, and Huffschmid, "Uncertain Cities"; Bayat, *How Ordinary People Change the Middle East.*

[54] F. Afary, "Solidarity with Iranian Women."

[55] Amir-Ebrahimi, and Huffschmid, "Uncertain Cities," 32–33.

This was an incredibly courageous act that left the public stunned. Polls have shown that most Iranians believe that wearing the hijab should be voluntary, but the government refuses to listen and from time-to-time arrests women for improper wearing of the hijab, let alone for not wearing one.[56] Soon pictures and videos of Movahed went viral, and dozens of other young women engaged in similar acts of protest and were promptly arrested. Some posted bail and were released; others who could not afford bail remained in jail.[57]

Campaigns for Change

A second form of political and goal-oriented protest are social campaigns, a majority of which are organized by women, especially attorneys. There have been numerous such campaigns, such as the Campaign to Release Political Prisoners, Campaign to Eradicate Stoning and Executions, Campaign for Environmental Reform, Campaign of Mothers for Peace, and Campaign to Protest the Rape and Torture of Political Prisoners. One of the most well-known and successful of these movements was the Campaign for Equality, which embarked on the grassroots One Million Signatures Campaign.[58] Taking a page from Moroccan feminists, women blended traditional Middle Eastern practices of gathering petitions, the consciousness-raising techniques of American feminists in the 1970s, and contemporary methods of access to the internet and electronic newsletters in order to launch a movement to change laws restricting women's rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance, among others. By March 2007, nearly four hundred trained young women were going to private homes, doctors' offices, buses, trains, parks, restaurants, and elsewhere carrying petitions and asking for the signatures of ordinary women as well as men. Whether they signed or not, each person received a brochure explaining the legal inequalities facing women in plain language and with examples.[59]

More recently, Iranian feminists started their own #MeToo Campaign. In a country where a young woman who has been sexually molested or raped can be accused of having brought it upon herself, and be punished by the state, a new generation of courageous women have begun speaking out about their experiences of sexual harassments, abuse, assault, and rape, and they have named influential men. The perpetrators included Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders and clerics, members of Parliament, as well as colleagues and family members. As in the United States and France, many of the accused men are artists, writers, and academics, and those who brought charges against them are their students, assistants, and mentees. Among these men was Kameel Ahmady, a sociologist who had written extensively on violence against

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[56] Maljoo, Mohammad, "Iranian Koja Istādehand?"

[57] Amir-Ebrahimi, and Huffschmid, "Uncertain Cities," 32–33; F. Afary, "Support Iranian Women's Acts of Protest."

[58] Tohidi, "The Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran," 421–25.

[59] Casey, "Challenging the Mullahs."

women, female genital mutilation, and child marriage. Yet testimonies by his research assistants and students showed that he either forced himself on them or put them in highly vulnerable situations where they felt they had no choice but to acquiesce to his demands. Likewise, twenty-two women accused the prominent artist Aydin Aghdashloo of sexual molestation. In one case, reminiscent of Harvey Weinstein and other media celebrities, Aghdashloo asked the young journalist Sara Omatali to go to his office for an interview, where she was confronted with the naked artist attempting to grab her.[60]

The leaders and defenders of these campaigns are dedicated feminists and human rights advocates, some of whom have received national and international recognition for their tireless activities. Among them are Nasrin Sotoudeh, an attorney and human rights activist who has fought for the rights of women and children, LGBT prisoners, religious minorities, journalists, and artists, as well as those who face the death penalty in the draconian prisons of Iran. In 2018 she was sentenced to thirty-eight years in prison and 148 lashes for the crime of representing the "Girls of Revolution Street." She went on a hunger strike, was released on medical leave, then brought back to prison and released again on furlough after contracting COVID in 2021.[61] Sotoudeh has received numerous international awards for her work, and her life was the subject of a powerful documentary produced by Jeff Kaufman and Marcia Ross in 2020 (Nasrinfilm.com).

Another key figure is Narges Mohammadi, a mother with small children and the Deputy Director of the Center for Defenders of Human Rights in Iran, founded by Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi. In 2009 she was sentenced to eleven years in prison after protesting the fraudulent elections that year, but she was released in 2013 for medical reasons. In 2015 she was rearrested and charged with sedition for starting the Campaign Against Death Penalty. The state has continued to condemn her for her support for Sunni minority political prisoners of Iran and Baha'is. In 2016 she received a sixteen-year prison sentence. As a result of global pressure from human rights activists and organizations, she was released in 2020. Shortly after, in the fall of 2021, she was reimprisoned for participating in solidarity gatherings with the families of those who were killed in the November 2019 protests and for organizing a solidarity protest with Afghan women against the return of the Taliban to power. Recently she published *White Torture*, a two-volume collection of interviews with political prisoners that focuses on condemning solitary confinement. Mohammadi was the 2016 recipient of the Weimar Human Rights Award from Germany.[62] In 2018, she was awarded the Sakharov Prize by the Physical Society of America. She was also nominated for the 2021 Nobel Peace prize.

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[60] F. Afary, "The #Me Too Movement in Iran."

[61] F. Afary, "Conversations with Producers of Nasrin Documentary."

[62] Information on these and other political prisoners was compiled by the Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists and published in F. Afary, "Solidarity with Iranian Women."

Several other women leaders belong to high-placed families of the Islamic Republic. They have used their relatively protected social position to defend women's rights and human rights, though even this has not saved them from routine harassment and periodic imprisonment. The most notable, of course, is Zahara Rahnavad, who has been under house imprisonment since 2009 (more on her later in this article). Azam Taleghani is the daughter of Ayatollah Taleghani. Her father was one of the key leaders of the 1979 Revolution of Ali Shariati. Azam has been a vocal critique of the regime and even lost her parliamentary seat because of her outspokenness. Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of the former president of the Islamic Republic Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, served as a member of Parliament (1996–2000) during the reformist Khatemi era. She was repeatedly arrested and was imprisoned for her vocal stand against many actions of the state. She remains a staunch opponent of mandatory hijab, an advocate of women's rights and a brave and vocal critique of the regime.

There are also a number of leading human rights advocates in diaspora. Among them are Shirin Ebadi, former Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who has remained a tireless human rights activist and has continued to speak out from the United States and Europe about many sensitive issues, such as the rights of the persecuted Baha'i community of Iran; Another example is Shadi Sadr, an attorney and journalist. She was abducted and imprisoned in Iran in 2009, then fled to Europe. Sadr received the Dutch Human Rights Defender Tulip for her tireless advocacy on behalf of human rights issues in Iran. Shadi Amin, a writer and LGBTQ activist and founder of the Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network (6Rang, pronounced "Shish Rang") lives in Frankfurt. Among her contributions has been the "No to Forced Sex Change" project, which documents the medicalization of gender identity in Iran.

Iranian Women as Leaders in Mass Protests

Iran has also been the scene of a number of mass protests in the last several years. The most well-known was the 2009 Green Movement, a spontaneous outburst aimed at the rigged presidential elections in June of that year. *Al Jazeera* described the demonstrations as the "biggest unrest since the 1979 Revolution." Protests broke out when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was expected to lose the elections, was overnight declared winner for a second term by an outrageous 62% of the vote. The expected winner, Mir Hossein Mousavi, was declared loser with an astonishingly low 34% of the vote cast. Soon millions of people were on the streets demanding, "Where is my vote?" The *New York Times* reporter Roger Cohen, who was in Tehran at the time, wrote, "Iran's women stand in the vanguard. For days now, I've seen them urging less courageous men on. I've seen them get beaten and return to the fray."[63] He also noted that in Shi'i-Iranian society, where martyrdom is a powerful symbol, the protesters chose to honor Neda Agha

[63] Cohen, "A Supreme Leader Loses His Aura."

Soltani, a young woman who was killed by the police during the protests, as the symbol of their crushed movement.[64]

After violently suppressing the demonstrations with live bullets, the regime placed Mir Hossein Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, as well as another election frontrunner, Mehdi Karroubi, under house arrest, a situation that has continued for over a decade. The fact that Rahnavard, who was not a candidate for any office, was also placed under house arrest, suggests how fearful the government was of her charisma, a woman who had been called "the Michelle Obama of Iran" during the elections. In the 1970s Rahnavard had been a devout Islamist supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and a poster child for the way educated Iranian women were supposed to behave after the revolution. Two decades later, she became a vocal feminist who quoted Simone de Beauvoir and complained about women being the "second sex." In campaigning for her husband in the spring of 2009, Rahnavard insisted that Iran should join the United Nations–-backed Convention for Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and advocated for freedom for all political prisoners. Her husband issued a long list of gender reforms that he would carry out if he were elected. The support for Mousavi was thus in no small measure due to the popularity of Rahnavard, whom many voters, especially women, perceived as an embodiment of change, something which the government clearly recognized and feared.[65]

From December 2017 to January 2018, mass protests against high inflation and government corruption called for an end to the Islamic Republic and its interventions in Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere. The demonstrations even included chants of "death to Khamenei." Thousands, including many women, and many Arabs of Khuzistan, as well as Kurds were arrested by the security forces. A second wave of mass protests in November 2019 involved more than two hundred thousand people and took place when the price of petroleum went up 50%. The protests took place in more than a hundred urban and rural areas of the country and lasted for four days. Demonstrators focused on nonpayment of wages, lack of health insurance benefits, and especially environmental concerns, since a combination of global warming and rapacious state capitalist policies has led to a drastic water shortage and brought the country to the verge of an "environmental collapse." [66] But once again, an ostensibly economic protest soon became a political one and bridged the gap between the urban poor and what Assef Bayat has called "the poor middle classes"—that is, highly educated young people who cannot attain the basics of a middle-class life. [67] These protests were violently put down. The *New York Times* reported that in one day alone, 180 people were murdered by the Revolutionary Guards in the oil-rich province of

[64] Cohen, "Life and Death in Tehran."

[65] J. Afary, "Iran's Hopeful First Lady."

[66] F. Afary, "The Iranian Uprising of 2019–2020," 147–48.

[67] Bayat, "Eterāz-e Nasli ke Nemishenāseem."

Khuzestan in a marsh where protesters had taken refuge.[68] As several journalists noted, women were clearly in the leadership of these protests:

> "Women are on the front lines of the protests. *They* are the ones who stand up to the [Revolutionary] Guards and refuse to flee, *they* encourage the people to resist, *they* get into discussion with the oppressive forces, *they* stand before the weapons of the plainclothes men, chant slogans, whereby the crowd joins them. It is the women who take pictures and videos, and when the [Guards] try to arrest a person, it is the women who confront them and try to save the arrested person. The Islamic Republic is stunned by the widespread presence of women in the protests. At the start of the Fall 2019 protests, the government admitted as much. They claimed that women were agents of foreign spy networks. The state media called them suspicious and agents of foreign powers. . .. Plainclothes forces used sexual violence to frighten the women and to push them back to their homes. But the influence of such taboos and cultural practices, which are at the root of the Islamic Republic, is fading. When someone, after witnessing the massacre of 1500 people, has the courage to stand up to the security forces, sexual molestation is a feeble weapon."[69]

The spread of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 temporarily halted these protests. When the epidemic started in the winter of 2020, the government initially hid the emergence of the disease in order to bring people to the polling stations in late February 2020. Then for ideological and political reasons, the state refused to quarantine the shrines in Qom, a decision that dramatically increased the rate of infections. In a country were the public generally trusts the medical establishment, the authorities tried to spread conspiracy theories about the vaccine. *Human Rights Watch* reported that when vaccines became available, Ayatollah Khamenei claimed on January 8, 2021, that the vaccines from the United States and United Kingdom were "completely untrustworthy" and added, "It's not unlikely they would want to contaminate other nations."[70] As a result, Iran has had a catastrophic number of deaths due to the epidemic. As of late 2021, per official government statistics, more than 128,000 people had died (though the real numbers were far higher), and more than six million were infected. If anything, government's refusal to act has increased the public's mistrust and the intensity of their rage. There are signs that mass protests are returning, this time including new segments of society, such as farmers in Isfahan, who held weeks of protest in late 2021 because vital water sources have been diverted from farming toward the religious city of Qom, and especially the military-industrial complexes in urban environments. Teachers' protests are also on the rise again throughout Iran; their demands include not only wages above starvation level but free, high-quality

[68] Fassihi and Gladsone, "With Brutal Crackdown, Iran Is Convulsed."

[69] Dehghani, "Zanān dar Jonbesh-e Eterāzi."

[70] "Iran: Government Mismanagement."

education for all youth and an end to discrimination against national and religious minorities in the educational systems.

The Iranian regime understands the ever-increasing power of the century-old women's movement and has used myriad strategies to stifle these voices. Activists are beaten, arrested, thrown in jail, and then some are released; major newspapers are barred from covering the campaigns or shut down outright; organizations that provide activists with a platform receive ominous warnings; and the cyberspace sites of the campaign are routinely shut down. In fall of 2021, in an attempt to push women back into a life of marriage and multiple births, draconian anti-abortion and anti-birth-control regulations were adopted, the likes of which Iranian society had never seen. Birth control is no longer available without prescription, and pregnant women are to be monitored by the state to be sure they carry their pregnancy to term.[71]

We cannot predict the future, but we can say with absolute certainty that history shows Iranian women will continue to forge a way ahead. Like a mighty river blocked by giant boulders, the movement continuously forges a way and finds a new path to express itself, sometimes in entirely unanticipated ways. In the last century Iranian women have achieved momentous changes. They won the right to an education, to enter the public spaces, they consistently fought the state-imposed regulations on what they could or could not wear, they gained the right to work in the private and public sectors, to vote and to be elected, and they have been increasingly opting for more companionate marriages and the right to leave an abusive one. Women have taken control of their bodies and reduced the number of pregnancies or else have chosen not to have children. Women have become top scientists, engineers, academics, journalists, attorneys, and judges who have tirelessly fought for social justice. They have unleashed a new literary genre of feminist literature and have become some of the most prominent publishers, directors, and artists of the last few decades. Persian-speaking feminists are forming links of solidarity with their Kurdish, Azerbaijani, Baluchi, and Arab compatriots, with Sunni and Baha'i religious minorities, and have been at the forefront of the solidarity movement in Iran with Afghan women. Women's battles for independence in the bedrooms and on the streets are connected. In the process, Iranian advocates of women's rights have broken through centuries-old sexual and gender taboos and rituals, and also earned the enormous respect of their society. The world community has also recognized them as courageous trailblazers and pioneers of a more democratic future society in Iran.

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[71] "Tarh-e 'Javani."

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