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Guest Editor's Note

Outside observers are often perplexed about the gender and sexual politics of the Islamic Republic. In the last two decades, the rates of prostitution, drug addiction, suicide, and of girls running away from home have all dramatically shot up. During the same period, the female employment rate has remained below other Muslim countries such as Turkey and Tunisia. Retrogressive laws regarding marriage and divorce have also remained in place. In summer 2008, Iran's Parliament attempted unsuccessfully to reinstate the right of a man to take a second wife, without the permission of the first wife, a measure that was dropped due to loud opposition by advocates of women's rights. But the same period has also witnessed significant improvements for women in education, health, and access to family planning, the latter resulting in an astonishing drop in fertility rates. Recently, the Eighth Parliament revised Shi'i inheritance laws and for the first time granted widows the right to inherit some land from their deceased husbands. Moreover, Iran has developed one of the most vibrant dissident women's movements in the Middle East, one that is slowly finding support in both urban and rural communities, and among both women and men. Since 2006, the Campaign for Equality has embarked on the grassroots One Million Signatures Campaign. Taking a page from Moroccan feminists, Iranian women and their male supporters have 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.

How do we explain the coexistence of these highly contradictory social and ideological trends at the turn of the twenty-first century? The authors whose contributions appear in this volume attempt to unravel some of these issues.

In my essay, I turn to the work of Michel Foucault and to recent studies of birth control and family planning in the US to examine the gender and sexual policies of the Islamic Republic and their ramifications. Foucault argues that beneath a variety of sexual prohibitions of seventeenth-century European societies a "veritable discursive explosion" around sexuality could be discerned. Considered alongside trends concerning gender and sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran, Foucault's portrait of the Victorian era can shed light on the repercussions of the new sexual austerities that were imposed after the Iranian revolution of 1979. In the 1980s the Islamist government instituted a dramatic reversal in human rights, especially women's rights. The state revived premodern social conventions (repudiation,

veiling, flogging) but enforced them through modern means and institutions, resulting in a far more rigorous application. Its system of distributive justice meant that Muslims and non-Muslims, and men and women each received different treatment before the law. Defunct and repressive Shi'i rituals of purity and penance were brought back, while polygamy and sex with underage girls were newly sanctioned. Openly gay men were severely punished, even executed. However, the popular notion in the West to the effect that Islamism has enforced an inclusive form of sexual repression on the Iranian people does not explain the complexity of what has taken place. There have also been significant improvements in women's education and health along with a remarkable drop in birth rates. How can such important reforms, which have many positive implications for women, coexist with harshly misogynistic laws and policies? Part of the answer is that before the revolution Iranian women had already made significant advances in these areas. But another part of the answer lies in the fact that the policies of the Islamist government cannot easily be categorized as "puritanical" or "moralistic." Rather we can argue that various factions within the state actively deployed a new "sexual economy" for the population. Sometimes, the Islamist state privileged patriarchal interpretations of gender norms over more modern ones. At other times, it adopted modern projects such as family planning alongside a discourse that presented them as practices rooted in traditional Islam. In all cases, the state used modern institutions to disseminate and enforce these practices.

Erika Friedl looks at the results of these policies in some southern rural communities. Following the rapid spread of the national culture and of modernist ideologies and practices, dramatic changes are happening in intra-family relationships in many rural communities. People redefine their responsibilities and expectations as small nuclear families increase, women aspire to higher education and employment, and the difficult economic situation necessitates various adaptations. In her analysis of recent ethnographic data, and drawing on her own research in rural areas and small towns in and around the province of Kohgiluyeh/Boyer-Ahmad in southwest Iran, as well as extensive travels throughout Iran, Friedl suggests that the shift from traditional authoritarian intra-family relations to relationships based on autonomy, individuation, independence and companionship creates both new intimacies and conflicts. The prevailing ideology of "progress" in contemporary Iran likely will further weaken patrilineal ties and kin relations while strengthening ties based on friendship and collegiality.

Mary Hegland's research in Aliabad, a settlement of some 7,000 people near Shiraz, points similarly to dramatic changes in gender identity and expectations in this rural community since the revolution. Thirty years ago, patriarchal definitions of women and their place and on-the-ground social conditions restricted female agency and kept women and girls under the authority of male supervisors. But recent years have witnessed growing opportunities for women. Most girls now complete high school before marriage, and may even travel to other cities for higher education. For the vast majority of women, however, more education has not led to greater women's participation in the labor market in "Aliabad."

Hegland's ethnographic research focuses on how girls negotiate between more traditional expectations and cultural constraints and the new opportunities to serve their own interests. Although work outside of the home presents too many difficulties for the great majority of Aliabad women, who must marry in order to obtain financial support, young women have used their education and their concomitant increased self-confidence, experience, status, and literacy to develop more influential positions within the marriage relationship, among kin and in-laws, and in the community.

Nearly all the economic studies on contemporary Iran point to pervasive rates of female unemployment. While confirming this trend, Fatemeh Moghadam explores the possibility of a considerable undercounting of women's labor force participation in the official surveys. According to official data, the percentage of women in the total active labor was only about 15.5 percent in 2006. Furthermore, according to the official data the share of women in total active labor in agriculture was about 10 percent in 1996. An examination of a large body of field research on the subject, however, suggests a much higher participation rate, about 40 percent of the total agricultural labor. Moghadam explores the reasons behind the underestimations. Pointing to the growing visibility of urban women in public space, the increasing number of skilled and educated women, the rising cost of living, and the need for both male and female incomes to support an urban family, some observers have suggested that the official data also underestimate urban female labor participation. Anecdotal information suggests the existence of a significant female informal economy in both traditional and modern sectors. Moghadam bases her analysis on a micro study of 350 working-age women in the affluent northern part of Tehran. She points out that a large number of these educated upper and middle class women have been active in the informal market. This finding is in sharp contrast to the studies in other developing countries in which informal participants are generally poor and unskilled and are unable to join the modern formal economy.

Turning to the cultural realm, Nasrin Rahimieh and Shahla Haeri explore women's responses to patriarchal policies and changes in intra-family relations through the lens of cinema. Rahimieh points out that the curtailment of women's rights in the Islamic Republic has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Among the legal changes that have profoundly impacted women's lives are divorce laws. However, if the legal arena has not given women much room for maneuver, the realm of cultural representation, particularly cinematic production by women, has provided a fertile ground for self-expression and resistance. Through an analysis of Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Kim Longinotto's ethnographic documentary, *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998), and two feature films, *Blackboards* (2000) by Samira Makhmalbaf and *Ceasefire* by Tahmineh Milani (2006), Rahimieh explores representations of the ways in which women work within and against the grain of the dominant structures of power.

Shahla Haeri describes what she sees as the subliminal messages of desire and intimacy, especially female desire, in several Iranian films such as *Gabbeh* (1995),

The Blue Scarf (1994), *The May Lady* (1997), and *Born in the Month of Mibr* (2000). Haeri argues that although the Islamic legal discourse has reasserted itself after the revolution of 1979 and appears to have become dominant, the “erotic” discourse that is ever so subtly embedded in Persian poetry and popular culture remains alive and may even be thriving. Haeri discusses representations of love and sex in these four films within the context of the dynamic tension between the legal discourse that regulates the gaze, *abkam-i nigab*, and the erotic discourse that subverts the very same regulations, *nazar-bazī*.

Finally, Firoozeh Papan-Matin turns to the realm of homoerotic desire and the state’s draconian policies on open homosexuality. In his 2007 speech at Columbia University, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that there are no homosexuals in Iran. A year later, during his second trip to the UN, he modified his earlier statement, declaring that Iran did not tolerate modern gay relations. Papan-Matin argues that while the state continues to torture and execute some openly gay men, it has opted to look the other way or remain quiet about the subject, during highly sensitive political periods. During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, such a flexible approach was adopted in dealing with Mohammad Khordadian, a famous Los Angeles based American-Iranian male cabaret dancer who was rumored to be gay. In the spring of 2002, Khordadian visited Iran for the first time in more than twenty years. The authorities seem to consider it an offence that he dared to challenge the morality codes of the Islamic Republic by crossing the border into Iran without any apprehension. But while he was imprisoned and tried on a variety of charges, the state chose never to openly discuss his sexual orientation and ultimately released him.

As this volume went through production, state persecution of the Campaign for Equality increased, in part because the Campaign has broken new ground on several levels. Activists have moved beyond the sectarian and ideological divides that have hampered the women’s movement for much of the twentieth century. They have made common cause with women and men from many different social, religious, and ideological backgrounds, established a genuine two-way conversation that has broken with both elitism and populism, and formulated demands that appeal to women of all social classes. Most of all, they have tried to change not just the law, but also the culture itself, and to articulate an independent feminist voice that as Nayereh Tohidi has suggested, demarcates “the women’s movement from both the native Islamists and Western imperialist patriarchies.”¹

This last point is crucial. For too long, Western powers, most recently the United States, have used the issue of the rights of Middle Eastern women for their strategic interests and abandoned it when it no longer fit their purposes. At the same time, the Islamic Republic understands the power of the country’s century-old women’s movement and has used myriad strategies to contain it. Nevertheless, the campaign moves on slowly but defiantly, continuing to challenge a history of oppression and inequality.

¹Nayereh Tohidi, “Iran’s Women’s Rights Movement and the One Million Signatures Campaign,” <http://www.peyvand.com/news/06/dec/1174.html>