Iranian women's struggle for freedom and equality

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The murder of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Iranian Kurdish woman arrested in Tehran by the "morality police" for "improperly wearing" the veil and beaten to death on 16 September 2022, provoked major demonstrations of anger against the Islamic regime. In a sign of rejection of the Islamic regime, women removed their compulsory veil, the ideological symbol of the regime, and demanded freedom. They initiated a protest movement that spread throughout the country and gained the support of young men. However, Iranian women's plight for equality and freedom goes back to the beginning of the Twentieth century. Many of them participated actively in different social movements and revolutions: the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911, the Movement for the Nationalization of Oil (1952–1953), the 1979 Revolution, the Green Movement of 2009, and the revolts of the past several years.[1] In this paper, I concentrate on the period under the Islamic regime (1979-) that has been a prelude to the ongoing women's revolution against political Islam.

Six periods can be distinguished in the life of the Islamic regime in Iran, its policies on women, and the mobilization of women: the Revolutionary period, the period of Reconstruction, the Reformist period, the Radical populist period, the Moderate conservative period, and the period of Iranian-style Talibanization.

1 Eliz Sanasarian (1982): The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini. Praeger. Janet Afary (1996): *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–11. Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*, New York, Columbia University Press. Parvin Paidar (1997): *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

1980–1989: Revolutionary period

Barely a month after the establishment of the Islamic regime in Iran in February 1979, the Family Protection Law promulgated under the Shah in 1967, which granted more rights to women and was constantly reformed, was retracted to apply a conservative Islamic model to women's rights and family law: significant limitation of the right to divorce and custody of children for divorced mothers, return to the minimum age of marriage and criminal responsibility for girls from 18 years to 9 years and 15 years for boys (increased to 13 and 17 years respectively in 2002), prohibition of women from serving in the judiciary. The wearing of the veil, the first sign of the construction of the Islamic regime and its guarantor, became compulsory. According to the new rulers, it symbolized the pure blood of the martyrs and the honor of the Shi'ite nation that the Islamic state claimed to preserve. Slogans and effigies such as "We did not give our blood for women to walk around naked (unveiled)" or "My sister, your veil is your honor" illustrate this assimilation claimed by Islamists.

Family planning initiated under the shah in 1968 was deemed un-Islamic and abandoned.

Women from the modern middle classes who refused to submit to the moral order of the Islamists (symbolized by the compulsory wearing of the veil) lost their jobs and were pushed out of the public sphere in favor of Islamist women. The latter, of more modest social and family origins, often less educated and traditional, thus assured their social mobility. Calling themselves heirs to the Revolution, these Islamist women were associated with the revolutionary government. However, some of them (educated and from the traditional middle classes) later realized that the regressions concerned all women, secular as well as religious, and traditional as well as modern.

During the revolutionary period, state authorities attempted to confine women to domesticity. By marginalizing women and excluding women from the public sphere they imposed private patriarchy[2] and denied women autonomy and independence. Indeed, they perceived women exclusively as family members whose rights and obligations should be defined in relation to their male relatives.

2 Sylvia Walby. *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997.

The imposition of private patriarchy also meant overwhelming privileges granted to men by law. According to the Civil Code, the man has the unilateral right to polygamy and divorce (Article 1133); the woman has no right to leave the home, to travel or to work without her husband's permission if he pays her alimony; parental authority is vested exclusively in the father or paternal grand-father, or failing that, in the father's line of male descent; the man is the head of the family to whom the woman must submit (tamkin). If the wife refuses to submit, her husband is allowed by law to punish her, first by refusing to provide her with her pension (article 1108) and, in some cases, by divorce (Article 1105). The man has the right to enter into an indefinite number of temporary marriages. Temporary marriage (called nekâh-e monqate', mot'eh, or sigheh), which can last from a few minutes to 99 years, is specific to Twelver Shi'ism. These regressions provoked the general discontent of many women and forced the Islamist women parliamentarians, who occupied 4 seats (or 1.7 %) in each of the first three parliaments, to hold that the teachings of Islam were not respected.[3] The outbreak of the Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988) however, mobilized the country's resources, and was a major impediment to the flourishing of debates on gender inequalities. Although Islamist women contributed to war efforts, and some were recruited by the Pâsdârân (Revolutionary Guards) and the Basidj (militia), women's social role was not recognized by the power elite, who considered women primarily as biological reproducers and house-workers. [4]

Women were expected to show their commitment to Islam and to the Islamic Republic by accepting gendered roles. As presumed main guardians of traditions they were required to reinforce Islamic family ties thereby maintaining social cohesion. In addition to traditional instruments of propaganda such as mosques and Friday prayers, school books and modern communication networks, especially television and cinema, perpetuated the state ideology on women. Women activists, both the seculars and the disillusioned educated Islamists, who gained social mobility thanks to the revolution and the thrusting aside of secular women during the revolutionary period challenged the dominant ideological discourse.

3 Azadeh Kian (1997): "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: A Gender Conscious Drive to Change", in: *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (1), pp. 75–96.

4 Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh (2021): Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

The existence of a women's movement at the turn of the twentieth century, statutory changes under the Pahlavis (1925–1979), and women's participation in the 1979 revolution have largely contributed to women's mobilization against gender inequality. Today these past social and political struggles and the rights women had been granted or had gained have become women's collective memory to which they refer in order to challenge the Islamization of laws and institutions and gendered power relations.

1989–1997: the period of Reconstruction

After the end of war, a new period called the period of reconstruction started under the presidency of Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani[5]. The power elite, who were forced to concede to women's professional skills due to the shortage of specialists, played a double role and maintained a double ideological discourse. On the one hand, they continued to perceive women primarily as biological reproducers and house-workers, simultaneously, however, they responded to the demands of the female population in general, and the pressure of active, professional women. The policies of women's occupation adopted in 1992 by the High Council of Cultural Revolution chaired by the former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani reflected the contradictions of such double standards and discourses. The power elite however, started to accept that women had specific problems. The Office of Women's Affairs (an offshoot of the presidential bureau) was created in 1992 with the aim of "finding solutions to women's problems". With the readopting by the government of family planning and birth control in 1989, the birth rate started to diminish sharply. The results of the first national census of the population under the Islamic Republic (taken in 1986) had revealed a total increase of fifteen million in the population since 1976, the last national census of the population under the shah. The annual population growth rate thus averaged 3.9 percent, one of the highest in the world. The economic crisis, the lack of resources to respond to the needs of the young generation (in matters of education, health, employment, etc.) forced the government to adopt projects to diminish this birth rate, despite clerical opposition and the pro-birth traditions in Islam. To strengthen birth control, a law was enacted that stipulated that

5 Hashemi-Rafsanjani died in 2017.

government assistance to large, low-income families would not be granted beyond three children. This policy was accompanied by the establishment of a growing number of rural health clinics, as well as the training of local health workers to conduct family planning and child immunization campaigns and improve the health status of the rural population.

Women also became very active in the realm of journalism. Some women's magazines published in the 1990s by Islamic advocates of women's rights (especially Zanân, Farzâneh, Zan) played a crucial role in establishing a dialogue between Islamic and secular advocates of women's rights. The editors of these magazines invited secular women to contribute to women's press that served as a forum for criticizing gendered citizenship as reflected in the Constitutional law, the civil and penal codes, or work legislation. Despite their political and ideological differences, a gender and class solidarity emerged among these women who overwhelmingly belonged to Persian/Shi'ite urban middle classes. Those activists attempted to obtain gender equality through reforms in institutions and laws. Their strategy was therefore to question relations of power within both state and society in the context of concrete constraints, a version of what Deniz Kandiyoti has called "bargaining with patriarchy".[6]

In the 1990s, the scope of debates on the condition of women expanded. The Islamic women's associations, women's religious seminaries, and secular women's informal groups and gatherings reinforced gender solidarity and increased collective consciousness. Common grievances led to the emergence of an unprecedented gender solidarity between secular and Islamic women's rights advocates. Secular specialists who had been forced into isolation for several years, adopted a new strategy of asserting their social identity through critical writings. Thanks to women activist's pressures, women judges were rehabilitated in the judiciary and started to serve in the courts although they still don't have the right to append their signature. Despite women's plights and struggles, however, only minor legal changes occurred during the period of reconstruction. The ruling elite continued to perceive women as minors who needed assistance.

However, Islamic doctrines, laws and principles as well as traditional values and norms were constantly challenged and reinterpreted by female

6 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", *Gender and Society*, 2 (3), September 1988, pp. 274–290.

social actors who rejected the fixed and traditionalist reading of the Qur'an and Islamic traditions, attempting to interpret the texts and traditions for the benefit of women, hence the emergence of a female reading of the Qur'an based on the premise of gender equality. Several articles of the enforced Civil Code, including one concerning men's right to polygamy, are directly based on Qur'anic texts and, in particular, the Surat, "The Women" (*Al-Nisa*). This is why some female Islamic activists, without claiming to be feminists, embarked on a process of historicizing and contextualizing Islam in order to re-examine the Qur'anic verses. The magazine *Payam-i Hajar*, published by Azam Taleqani (died in October 2019), was the first in Iran after the Revolution to reject the legalization of polygamy and propose a new interpretation of the texts. "The analysis of the Qur'anic texts on polygamy shows that this right is endorsed by the Qur'an only in certain specific cases, and solely to respond to a social need, with the aim of extending social justice. These specific instances were times of war during which heads of households were killed at the front, leaving behind numerous orphaned children and widows without resources. In those days, such situations caused significant problems for the Muslim community. In the absence of social institutions to take care of widows and orphans, the responsibility was passed on to Muslim men through polygamy". This new interpretation of the Qur'anic texts confirms that "God has endorsed polygamy in the case of social need and on the condition that men can maintain equity between their spouses." The paper refers to the situation prevailing in post-revolutionary Iranian society in order to exclude any justification of polygamy on the basis of social necessity, since "in contrast to ancient times, the modern state and its institutions are constructed to help needy families and polygamy no longer has a social function to fulfill."[7]

Among the magazines published by Islamic feminists, *Zanân*, published by Shahla Sherkat, occupied a unique position. Shortly after it was launched in 1992, it published a series of articles to demonstrate that the Qur'an did not forbid women to pronounce religious edicts and that it even permitted them to take on leading roles in a society's religious, legal and political life. Rejecting laws that strengthened men's superior position in the family, the

7 Forouq Ebn Eddin (1992): "Louzoum-e eslah-e qavanin-e marbout beh talaq, t'addod-e zojat va hezanat" [The need for reform of the laws on divorce, polygamy and the guardianship of children], in: *Payam-e Hajar*, 10 September 1992, pp. 28–29.

Islamic feminists made a case for equality under the law and the sharing of responsibilities between the spouses. In re-interpreting Islamic texts and laws, Islamic feminists sought to confirm the legitimacy of female authority in political, religious and legal institutions.[8] "The Qur'an did not forbid women from being judges." Obstacles to the exercise of religious authority by women were also discussed in a series of articles in the magazine. "In the central Islamic texts, nothing demonstrates or justifies Islam's ban on women from delivering religious edicts or from becoming sources of imitation. In the secondary sources, however, a number of such indications exist." According to this author, there is no consensus among the religious authorities to justify such obstacles.[9]

The "divine character" of Islamic laws and traditions faded away to make room for critical discussion. These efforts were facilitated by the diversity of interpretations within the clergy due to the multiplicity of sources of imitation and the centrality of the notion of ijtihad in Shi'ism. These civic practices were, however, limited to urban women from the educated middle classes, often Persian and of Shi'ite origin, who still constitute the hard core of the current feminist movement.[10]

1997–2005: Reformist period

The third period started with the election of Mohammad Khatami, to which women largely contributed. It was with a strong hope for a radical political, juridical, and cultural change and the improvement of their status and condition that the majority of women, from different social and family backgrounds, participated in the presidential elections of 1997 and 2001,

8 Azadeh Kian (2011): "Gendering Shi'ism in Post-revolutionary Iran", in: Roksana Bahramitash/Eric Hooglund (eds.), *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, London: Routledge, pp. 24–35.

9 Mina Yadegar-Azadi (1992): "Qezavat-e zan", *Zanan*, 1992, 5, p. 21 and p. 28. The author of these articles, who adopted a female pseudonym, is in fact Hojjat-ol Eslam Mohsen Saidzadeh. In 1998, he was summoned before the Clerical Court, stripped of his religious position and imprisoned for his reformist ideas.

10 For a discussion on Islamic Feminisms in Iran, see, Azadeh Kian (2010): "Islamic Feminism in Iran: A New Form of Subjugation or the Emergence of Agency?", in: *Critique internationale* Volume 46, Issue 1, pp. 45–66. https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-critique-internationale-2010-1-page-45.htm

municipal elections of 1999 and parliamentary elections of 2000, and their near-unanimous votes for Mohammad Khatami and other reformist candidates. The 13 reform-minded women in the sixth parliament attempted to pass laws to improve the legal status of Iranian women. However, the Guardian Council (appointed by the Leader and dominated by conservative clerics, charged with ensuring the constitutionality of laws and their compatibility with Islam) aborted these reforms on the grounds that they were incompatible with Islam. Among these disapproved bills were Iran's membership of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). After many discussions, finally, the minimum age of marriage and penal responsibility for girls was increased to 13. Likewise, gender issues were largely absent from debates between reformers and conservatives, and the law continued to consider women as minors and placed them for life under the guardianship of their fathers or husbands.

President Khatami excluded government intervention to promote women's status arguing that the development of the civil society inevitably would contribute to satisfying women's demands and would provide women with the means to transform their demands into laws. Secular feminists finally obtained the authorization to publish a magazine in 1998 called Second Sex (Jens-i Dovvom), edited by Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani. They also founded the Women's Cultural Centre, organized public meetings to discuss women's citizenship rights and publicly celebrated 8 March, International Women's Rights Day. During the reformist era, some reformist women members of parliament also publicly celebrated this day. Despite the crucial role played by women in his election and re-election in 2001, president Khatami conceded to conservative pressures by refusing to nominate women ministers.

The persistence of gender inequality during Khatami's presidency and the sixth parliament disillusioned women activists and widened the gap between the female population and the state. It both demobilized women's participation in politics as voters and radicalized women in movement who started to exclusively rely on their own to promote women's status and the equality of rights.

2005–2013: Radical populist period

Political demobilization of the educated middle class women (and men) first led to the election of a neo-conservative seventh and eight parliaments (2004–2008, 2008–2012), then to the election of a radical populist president in 2005, supported by fundamentalist clerics and gender segregationists. Anti-feminist women members of the seventh and eight parliaments supported polygamy, advocated more repressive measures against "badly veiled women", and rejected the approval of the CEDAW. These regressions reinforced the gap between civil society and state.

The centrality of the state's role in the rentier economy allowed it to maintain the dependence of the poorest groups through social policy, and to clientalize other social groups, including part of the middle class, through the allocation of resources and thus co-option. During this period, women's rights and activities were curtailed and conservative laws were passed, including the Family Protection Act of 2007, which facilitated polygamy and male-initiated divorce. Campaigns by women's rights activists continued, some of the collective actions of women in Iran were initiated by the educated middle-class activists, such as the One Million Signatures Campaign to Change Discriminatory Laws (started in 2006), Campaign against all forms of Violence Against Women, or the White Scarf Campaign to end gender discrimination and gain the right to enter the stadiums. However, these campaigns were better known outside the country than inside, and even less so among lower class and/or provincial women. Thus, it is the interpersonal ties that often create the political and ideological ties. The impact of this recruitment process explains the quasi-homogenous nature of women's social movements. Lower class women who did not have access to the social networks of middle-class activists, used the means available to them to help each other, without immediately taking up women's rights issues. In some villages, educated women organized literacy classes in their homes for women who were even poorer than they were, so that they could negotiate a better position for themselves within their families and social environments.

The Green Movement of June–July 2009 against massive electoral fraud during the presidential elections was a social movement that also expressed the specific demands of the educated middle-class women against discriminatory laws and for equality between women and men. The women of the Green movement transgressed the norms. Many of the young women who

participated in the protest movement were "badly veiled," wore makeup, and had nail polish. In short, they did not fit the dominant norms or the classic image of the political activist and had even been often labeled by the authorities as "apolitical" youth, the target of the "Western cultural invasion". However, they participated in demonstrations at the risk of their lives, often finding themselves at the forefront of the protest scene. They exhibited their multiple and ever-changing identities and affiliations. The Green Movement was crushed, tens of people were killed and over five thousand other arrested and imprisoned. Some leaders of the Green movement, i.e. Mir Hossein Moussavi, a former Prime minister and his wife Zahra Rahnavard, a Muslim feminist scholar, and Mehdi Karoubi, a former president of the Islamic Parliament are still under house arrest.

It should be remembered that during the two terms of office of the populist President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2009, 2009–2013), an all-out attack was also orchestrated against women's paid economic activity outside the home. In order to restrict women's presence in the public space and confine women to the domestic space, women, including those with a high level of education, who wanted or needed to work were pushed to work at home. The only exceptions were in sectors such as primary and secondary education or certain branches of medicine (such as gynecology) where gender segregation applies and women are expected to serve the female population exclusively. The nine female members of the Islamic Parliament, the majority of whom were conservative and close to Ahmadinejad, and who made up 3 % of those elected, did nothing to facilitate women's access to the job market. Several of these women MPs had even proposed a bill to reinforce gender segregation in the workplace and to punish more severely the non-respect of the Islamic veil. The percentage of women working in the formal sector of the economy dropped from 20 % under Khatami to only 15 %, 40 % of them in the public sector.

2013–2021: The Rohani period

During his electoral campaign, President Hassan Rohani promised much to women, but no significant legal changes took place during his term. Just as under Khatami, the disappointment of women's rights activists who had actively supported Rohani's candidacy in 2013 and 2017 was great as he did not keep

his electoral promises, submitting to the dictates of the Leader Ali Khamenei. Likewise, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by Iran and five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany on 14 July 2015 triggered significant hope within civil society. International and European sanctions were lifted in January 2016. However, hopes were shattered when Iranians realized that Western companies refrained from investing in their country and especially when in 2018 the American President Donald Trump left JCPOA and imposed sanctions with extraterritorial effects on Iranian oil and gas and other products. The American policy has strengthened the power of ultraconservatives, especially the Revolutionary Guards and their repressive policies, and weakened the civil society, especially women's rights.

The offensive of the Leader and the conservatives against women's rights and their presence in the public sphere accelerated after the election of Rohani. The Leader questioned the modern demographic behavior of women summoning the government to end family planning (in effect since 1989) which has reduced the population growth rate from 3.9 to 1.2 and the fertility rate from 6.8 to 1.6. Free distribution of contraceptives in clinics was banned, exposing poor women to the risk of unwanted pregnancies. Voluntary female and male sterilization is criminalized, and doctors who perform it are subject to prison sentences. It should be mentioned that 49 % of the population is under the age of 29, and 75 % are urbanized, 85 % of Iranian women 6 years and older and 70 % of rural women are literate. The literacy rate of the 6 to 24 has reached 96 %. In September 2016, aiming to double the population, the Leader issued an order stating that women are mothers and wives and the birth rate should increase. Women's work outside the home continues to be discouraged unless it is essential for the survival of her family, and the home is considered the best place for women. Despite his public statements in favor of gender equality, Rohani's government did not take any steps to increase women's economic activity or guarantee their rights within the family and society. Women continue to suffer from a civil code that institutionalizes gender inequality in the domestic sphere, discrimination in employment, and a minimum legal age for marriage that does not reflect reality (the average age of marriage for Iranian women is 24). In the absence of paid employment, many women depend on their husbands for survival and are forced to endure a difficult life, including domestic violence, against which they are not protected by law while the majority of the nearly four mil-

lion students are women. "The female labor force participation is one of the lowest in the world. In 2019, at just 18 percent participation rate, it ranked 175 out of 180 countries. This is caused by a host of long-standing legal and social impediments, hiring bias, and discrimination."[11]

Women's (and men's) activism is increasingly globalized and transnational and relies more on modern means of communication (internet, weblogs, telegram, instagram, facebook, twitter) that facilitate relations with the diaspora, than on face-to-face meetings with women in the country. Cyber activism has thus become the dominant form of expression for women's rights activists due to the crackdown on protest activities in civil society.

As of December 2018, Iran had 56,700,000 internet users, a penetration rate of almost 70 %; and 40,000,000 people had subscribed to facebook, a penetration rate of almost 50 %. Instagram reached 24 million active users in Iran in January 2018, ranking 7th in the world.

In rapidly changing societies, individuals gain power through social networks and individualized communication technologies that allow an increasing number of ordinary people to connect with and be recognized by many others.

In Iran, due to various state limitations set on the activities of organized groups, including women's rights groups, individuals further codify their political action through the values of their personal way of life as a means to empowerment. The empowerment of the younger generation is reflected, among other things, in the rejection of compulsory veil by a growing number of young women.

The personal action of women who determine their own goal and decide their forms of struggle corresponds to the action of young women called "the Girls of Enghelab Avenue" who started to remove their compulsory veil in public from December 2017 onward. These individual actions focused on gender identity and undermined dress codes of which the mandatory veil is the symbol. These young women have evolved on a globalized scene and are located between the local and the global. They question political Islam and its precepts in the unifying wake of globalized gender norms that have

11 Nadereh Chamlou (2021): "COVID-19 depressed women's employment everywhere, and more so in Iran", The Atlantic Council, April 29, 2021. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/covid-19-depressed-womens-employment-everywhere-and-more-so-in-iran/

transformed their relationships and interactions with state power as well as with society.

The act of unveiling in public has been an innovation in women's repertoire of action and a nucleus of resistance against power injunctions with myriads of personal claims even if all observed a homogenized methodical performance: climbing on a stage, removing the white or black headscarf, putting it on a stick, then waving it like a flag. The images of these young women advocating for individual freedom of choice, were widely disseminated on social networks giving them a wide scope both nationally and internationally. Although these individualized collective actions were sometimes inspired by the past repertoires of action, they often sought a rapid response to claims related to individual values and lifestyles (in this case the desire not to hide hair or the body).

2021–2024: The period of Iranian-style Talibanization

The Iranian presidential election of June 18, 2021, took place in a context of all-out political, economic and social crises, combined with a climate of mistrust of civil society. In the face of the complete locking of the political system that has substituted the appointment to the election, the abstention of the majority of voters (51,2 % according to official statistics) reflected a strong political act that intended to delegitimize the Islamic regime. To this massive and historic abstention was added the 4 million blank ballots that came second after Raisi's votes. Raisi, who died in a helicopter crash in May 2024, was a member of the "Death commission" that ordered the execution of thousands of political dissidents in Evin and Gohardasht prisons near Tehran in 1988.

Later, he was appointed head of the judiciary by the Leader, who also decided that he should become the next president. Raisi was thus supported by a large coalition of ultraconservatives and part of the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdarans), some of whom were candidates for the presidential election, but withdrew to support him. Raisi's presidency resulted in the ultraconservatives further restricting individual and collective freedoms and continuing to impose conservative and religious values.

Repression of all women's protest activities, imprisonment or prolongation of imprisonment sentences for women's rights activists (currently tens

of them have been sentenced to several years of imprisonment), increasing offensive public policies against women's rights (end of family planning, more limitations imposed on abortion rights of married women), increase in the number of early marriages especially due to poverty, are some of the outcomes of his rule. According to the Ministry of Labor, 36 million Iranians out of 80 million are poor. The number of girls attending school in several poor provinces decreased due to the pandemic that imposed online courses and the impossibility for children from poor families to access tablets or computers or cell phones.

The government encourages early marriage. According to the Center for Statistics, in 2021 there were 31379 cases of marriages of girls aged 10 to 14 years, an increase of 10 % compared to the previous year. The major reason of early marriage is poverty. According to the welfare organization, 17 % of marriages are before the age of 18 and 5 % of women who married were under 15. To encourage the youth to marry and to have children, the state provides important sums of money for each early marriage. Recently, new regulations were adopted to increasingly repress women who refused compulsory veiling. Women's initiatives against compulsory veiling gathered momentum in July 2022 when following an appeal by some young women in social networks, a number of them challenged the Islamic regime and walked in the streets unveiled. Several of them both in Tehran and in provincial towns were arrested. They aired demands to decide for their own life and said "I'm my own leader, you are your own leader", thus rejecting Ayatollah Khamenei's claim to have the right to decide for all Iranians.

The assassination of Jina Mahsa Amini and the harsh repression of demonstrators are examples of the Talibanization of power. The police and the militia have received carte blanche to repress civil disobedience and all protest activities.

Conclusion

The implementation of Islamic laws in the immediate aftermath of the revolution institutionalized gender inequality and aimed to reinforce patriarchal order. However, revolutionary changes combined with the implementation of modernization policies, especially in rural areas and small towns, have had crucial consequences for women from traditional religious middle and

lower class families and ethnic and religious minorities and unintended consequences for the power elite.[12]

The paradoxical modernization of women's attitudes, despite religious precepts and the predominant Islamist ideology has also led to their mounting resistance or opposition against gendered social relations. In a move that took the form of a collective strategy, Islamic and secular women's rights activists rallied to reject gender hierarchy, the norms imposed by the state and its laws in the name of religion and tradition, and to demand changes in laws and power relations. Through a feminine/feminist, dynamic and critical reading of the Qur'an and traditions, they proceeded to historicize and contextualize Islam and rejected the deterministic vision of religion that serves to justify discrimination and domination. Claiming their right to full citizenship, they have defended the idea that social inequalities between men and women are not a divine will. They are a political choice. These women have adopted a strategy of challenging power relations as illustrated by the ongoing *Woman, Life, Freedom Movement* against the Islamic regime and political Islam in power in Iran since 1979. An increasing number of Iranians from all religions and ethnicities now agree that gender equality, social justice and democracy are intertwined.

12 Azadeh Kian (2023): Rethinking Gender, Ethnicity and Religion in Iran. An Intersectional Approach to National Identity. London/New York: I.B.Tauris/Bloomsbury.