

**Impact of Iran-U.S. Relations on Women's Movement in Iran:  
From Ahmadinejad Era to Today**

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**Abstract:**

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran severed diplomatic ties with the U.S. Since then, Iran-U.S. relations have continued to be hostile and tension-filled to this day. Relations between the two countries have particularly worsened after the Ahmadinejad era, which had a significant impact on the women's movement in Iran. This article analyzes how "martyrdom," an iconic concept of Iranian identity, has influenced the women's movement in Iran, and it examines how women's rights activists have responded to state control by asserting the principles of feminism, gender equality, and other secular ideas. This study also points out that the discourse on women's rights has moved beyond the framework of Islam by citing an analysis of assertions made in Iran's only surviving women's magazine, *Zanān-i Imrūz* ("Women of Today"). These assertions reveal a divergence between the ideologies of Iran's Islamic political system and the human rights sought by civil society.

**Keywords:**

Iran, women's movement, gender equality, Shiite identity, feminism

## 1. Introduction

Iran-U.S. relations have been strained ever since revelations were made in 2002 of Iran's nuclear development activities. These tensions somewhat eased just prior to and following the signing of a nuclear agreement, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2015. However, after the Trump administration came to power in 2017, the U.S. imposed tougher unilateral economic sanctions against Iran, dealing a heavy blow to the country's economy. This article focuses on the women's movement in Iran from the Ahmadinejad era to the present. It also describes how progress made in the women's movement's is not unrelated to the strained relations between America and Iran.

Research on the women's movement in Iran tends to focus on the context of Iran's domestic political and social situation.<sup>1</sup> Previous research has shown how Iran's post-revolutionary ideologues imposed Islamic values on state governance. As a result, legislators constrained women's legal rights in laws related to women and family. Conflicts have arisen between reformists and moderates on one side and hardline conservatives on the other. Consequently, women's rights are sometimes curtailed and sometimes improved.<sup>2</sup> However, even as women's rights deteriorate under a particular conservative administration, it cannot be assumed that the women's movement always advances under the next administration with a moderate stance. In other words, differences between conservative and moderate regimes alone have not necessarily changed the environment for the women's movement.

Nayereh Tohidi carried out exceptional research and analyzed the Iranian women's movement in a more global context. She pointed out that transnational movements in the Middle East and America have influenced the women's movement in Iran. She also argued that since 2006, the One Million Signature Campaign (described later) and other movements calling for women's empowerment gained support online through collaboration with Iranian communities in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the author draws attention to the significant relationship between changes in Iran-U.S. relations and the women's movement. In particular, America's unilateral sanctions have greatly increased the hardships Iranians face in their daily lives, which continue to get worse day by day. The breakdown in Iran's relationship with America has shaped Iran's political landscape, which has cast a shadow on the government's policies on women's movements for forty years. The recent surge in unemployment due to the rial's significant devaluation over the past few months is merely another case in point.

One of the factors behind the strained relations between Iran and America is Iran's national identity. Trying to stand up against a global power like the United States, Iran's

political leaders often address their citizens with warnings about the monopolization of power in world politics, the use of global influence to pressure Iran's government, and dangers foretold by conspiracy theories involving the U.S. or Israel. They also insist that Iran is fighting against these pressures and abuses of power. Some scholars attribute these discourses to Iran's inclination to exhibit "subaltern nationalism."<sup>4</sup> Simply put, "subaltern" refers to a people who feel alienated from a power structure and are unable to gain hegemony. Shafi pointed out that "Iran has continuously maintained its subaltern character from the Qajar Dynasty to the present," since "Iran had a hard time gaining hegemony, both domestically and internationally."<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, some researchers have stressed that Iranian women were stripped of various rights after the Revolution. Thus, they tend to view women's rights activists in Iran as subaltern nationalists, like the leaders of student and labor movements.<sup>6</sup>

These studies view both Iran, as a nation, and Iran's women, particularly women's rights activists, as subaltern in nature. Indeed, if the U.S. is the dominant nation, Iran, being subject to its economic sanctions, is a nation under America's influence. It is also true that Iran's rights activists have experienced having their publishing activities suspended and censored by the government. If the government's power is conceived as "control," in the language of Spivak, the women's rights activists may be viewed as "social subordinates."

In reality, however, Iran as a nation has not entirely succumbed to America's domination; the fact that the nuclear issue has not been resolved to this day points to Iran's continuing defiance against American hegemony. Iranian women have likewise continued their publishing activities within and outside Iran up to the present time. Therefore, if we refer to both Iran as a nation and Iranian women activists as subaltern, we would naturally assign them to the dualistic stereotypes of being in "control" and being "marginal" or "subordinate." As the author believes, this view would lead to an oversimplification of the dynamic relationship between the state and civil society. Some studies view the voice of women's rights activists as an agency of change, asserting that "the subaltern speaks," in response to the thesis of "*Can the subaltern speak?*" However, the use of the term "subaltern" in itself could, in the author's view, lead to the labeling of women as a socially subordinate group.<sup>7</sup>

This article first looks into the impact of Iranian identity, which underlies the worsening relations between Iran and America. Then, the study examines how women activists have responded to Iran's political environment. By considering the above trends in research on the women's movement in Iran, this article focuses on the period from the Ahmadinejad administration to the present, as Iran-U.S. relations had started to worsen to the brink of military conflict.

The current study first examines the process by which the U.S.-American relations have worsened and then points out the relationship between the “spirit of martyrdom,” which was further strengthened during this worsening process, and the characteristics of the women’s movement in Iran. In the third section, this article delves into the interaction between the Iranian state and civil society regarding women’s activism in Iran. Finally, the author analyzes the trends of thoughts espoused in *Zanān-i Imrūz* (“Women of Today”), the only existing women’s political magazine in Iran today, to shed light on the relationship between the state and society in Iran.

## **2. Worsening of Iran-U.S. relations and women’s movement in Iran**

### **2.1. Worsening relations during the Ahmadinejad era**

Iran-U.S. relations drastically changed during the hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy at the start of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. After Iran achieved post-war recovery in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), it pursued diplomatic dialogs under the Khatami administration, pointing to an apparent improvement in Iran-U.S. relations. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, relations soured as Iran was named part of the “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and North Korea, by President George W. Bush. After the Anglo-American-led military campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Iran had to establish its national security policy while having U.S. forces stationed in its two neighboring countries to the east and west.

President Ahmadinejad’s administration, which was established in June 2005, took shape under such circumstances. The so-called “nuclear development problem” in Iran began through propaganda activities by Iranian dissident forces during the Khatami era in 2002. However, for around nine months from November 2004 to August 2005, Iran had stopped its uranium-enrichment activities. Accordingly, allegations by Europe, America, and Israel that Iran posed a threat did not come to the forefront during the Khatami era.<sup>8</sup> In this light, only after 2005 did the nuclear development issue in Iran come to be considered a threat to international peace. The first United Nations Security Council resolution demanding the suspension of Iran’s uranium-enrichment activities was adopted in 2006.

Former President Ahmadinejad was well-known for making controversial statements against the U.S. and Israel. His denials of the Holocaust naturally aggravated relations with Israel. Such extreme statements heightened the perception of a threat held by Europe, America, and Israel, leading to suspicions of Iran’s nuclear development program. As a result, along with

the US-led imposition of unilateral economic sanctions against Iran, the possibility of military attacks by Israel and America also became imminent. At that time, the president's harsh and combative language and the heightening of the perception of Iran's threat were escalating rapidly, pulling Iran into an adverse chain reaction leading to the continued worsening of relations with America.

In the background of these aggressive statements from the former president, as Heiman has already suggested, is the dichotomy of two opposing worldviews about "us, Iranians" aiming for inner "solidarity" against America as an external adversary. After the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized the political slogan "*liberation of the oppressed*," particularly when the Revolutionary Guards fought on the frontlines of the Iran-Iraq War. America, Israel, and the former President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, were naturally branded as the oppressors, and the Revolutionary Guards who died in the Iran-Iraq war were hailed as martyrs.<sup>9</sup>

This spirit of martyrdom in Iran is an essential element of Shiite identity. This spirit was inflamed by pressure from foreign enemies, strengthening Iranians' sense of solidarity as they boldly fought their oppressors. Iran came under pressure from Western countries during the nuclear crisis. In this period, the more imminent military attack from America became, and the more acutely Iran became isolated, its resistance against America as the oppressor became the defining elements of the Iranian national identity.<sup>10</sup>

The Ahmadinejad administration reversed its approach from the dialogue-based diplomacy of the Khatami administration. One example of this was its nuclear policy. Ahmadinejad promoted the ambition of Iran to become a nuclear power as a national strategy. Iran was discontent because international society was wary of its possession of nuclear weapons. Iran argued that countries like India and Pakistan openly declared that they possessed nuclear weapons, while Israel does not but is allowed by the international community to actually possess such weapons.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from its strategic and military importance for nuclear deterrence, nuclear development for Iran was also a source of national pride. The development of nuclear energy as a product of superior scientific technology was highly significant for Iran in gaining self-respect as a technological superpower that would not succumb to pressure from the West. Displaying this national pride, Ahmadinejad made the following statement in the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2006:

Citizens of Asia, Africa, Europe, and America are all equal...Nations are not equal in exercising their rights recognized by international law...Enjoying these rights is

dependent on the whim of certain major powers.

He asserted that Iran would not succumb to American pressure and attacks, since Iran was equal to the U.S.<sup>12</sup> He believed that sharing this sense of national pride among the general public would ensure the legitimization of his rule. In addition, the Ahmadinejad administration faced the problem of how to reduce widening economic disparities after the revolution. Thus, the administration aimed at strengthening its power base by subsidizing the country's middle class, which had grown after the Revolution. It also provided various benefits to the lower classes, which included the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij security forces and their families. This sentiment reflected a "cult of worship" for martyrdom peculiar to the Shia sect.<sup>13</sup> The Revolutionary Guards and the Basij soldiers, who served as volunteer militia, sacrificed their lives during the Iran-Iraq War. Those who died in war were worshipped as martyrs in the annual Ashura Festival, with surviving family members marching on the streets while carrying pictures of the martyred soldiers. How has this spirit of martyrdom in the Ahmadinejad era impacted the women's movement in Iran? The next section explores this issue.

## **2.2. Women's Movement in Iran**

After the revolution, Iran adopted a system called the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (*Velāyat-e Faqīh*), in which religious leaders (*Ulamā*) ruled the state at the center of sovereign power. During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1919–1979), Iran had adopted the Family Protection Law in 1967, which was amended in 1975. It increased the minimum age of marriage for women and expanded the rights of women in family-related laws, such as a women's right to ask for a divorce. Iran's Civil Code had not been thoroughly secularized since the Pahlavi Dynasty. Its constitution, based on Sharia law, had been preserved from the 1928 Civil Code. On the other hand, the Civil Code, which stipulated provisions related to family matters, was amended with the condition "*according to the principles of Islam.*" This insertion was made while the authority of the religious leaders, who held the theocratic right to interpret Sharia, became stronger as the country's system of government took an increasingly Islamic turn.

The Family Protection Law of 1975 was rescinded after the revolution because it did not conform with Islam. The minimum marriage age for women was reverted from 15 to 9 years old immediately after the revolution, although it was later raised to 13 under the Khatami administration. Child custody, inheritance, marriage, divorce, and other family rights of

women markedly retrogressed. Even polygamy became less restrictive than before the revolution.

In short, the views of Ayatollah Motahhari, the leading ideological figure of the Islamic Revolution, became the prominent view after the revolution. He asserted that “although men and women are equal before God, because of their biological sexual differences, their rights are different and complementary.”<sup>14</sup>

After the revolution, women intellectuals opposed these changes and fought to reform the Civil Code by publishing newspapers and magazines. Thus, for the next 20 years from the 1980s, various women's magazines, which were edited and written by women, were published<sup>15</sup>—from conservative magazines published in Qom, the center of Shiite seminaries, to progressive magazines advocating feminism. It was during the Khatami era that both the quality and quantity of women's publications reached their peak. After the revolution, women's rights activists worked to empower women, either as parliamentarians or publishers of women's magazines. Their leaders ranged from Islamic ideologists to secular feminists. As a result of these relentless efforts by women's rights activists, specific improvements were seen in women's family rights by the end of the 1990s. Also in this era, the number of conditions by which women had the right to ask for divorce increased to more than ten.<sup>16</sup>

However, this trend was reversed when the new Family Protection Bill was submitted to the Iranian Parliament under the Ahmadinejad administration in 2007. While the new bill mandated the registration of legitimate marriages, it effectively removed the requirement to register temporary marriages. Based on Ministry of Justice provisions (Article 22), the bill simplified the procedures for polygamy (Article 23). It also imposed a tax on the dowry paid by the husband to the wife (Article 25). Therefore, it was criticized as a move back to the conditions prevalent during the Iran-Iraq War, immediately after the revolution.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, in that immediate post-revolution period, Motahhari and other members of the *Ulamā* asserted that polygamy and temporary marriage systems were deeply rooted in the Islamic value of the “complementarity of roles of men and women.”<sup>18</sup>

During the Ahmadinejad era, the spirit of martyrdom also influenced the stricter enforcement of women's wearing of the hijab. From 2005 to 2007, the so-called morality police revived patrols to check whether women were adequately wearing the hijab. A law-enforcement organization called the *Komīte* played the role of morality police from the 1980s to the 1990s. They laid low in the Khatami era but resurfaced during Ahmadinejad's regime.

After the revolution, the political system created a distinction between a “correct hijab” and a “bad hijab,” exalting women wearing the “correct hijab” as ideal, virtuous Muslim

women of the Islamic Republic.<sup>19</sup> The Basij, an organization broadly involved in national defense as a security force along with the Revolutionary Guards, had a Women's Basij unit, which also underwent military training during the Iran-Iraq War. The Women's Basij was founded on the revolutionary spirit of Islam and was regarded by the political system as women who were willing to actively enlist in "holy war" when the nation calls upon them. Thus, as explained in the previous section, the worsening relations with the U.S. further inspired the spirit of martyrdom within Iran and underscored the notion of "virtue" among Muslim women. The image of the ideal Muslim woman, shaped during the war in the 1980s, was revived during the Ahmadinejad era, resulting in stricter adherence to wearing the "correct hijab" and in a more conservative view of women's family rights.

### **3. Feminism in Iran**

#### **3.1. The political system's outlook on feminism: "Feminism" that supports imperialistic rule**

During the Khatami era, the debate surrounding the hijab became significantly heightened. Although the mandatory wearing of the hijab was enforced in 1982, the political climate was not conducive to public discussions of its propriety. The compulsory hijab is a symbol of patriarchy, not merely an issue of clothing. It involves the question of a woman's right to self-determination, such as her right to freely dress herself as she wishes.

Iran has been surrounded by U.S. military forces occupying two of its neighboring countries, i.e., in Afghanistan since 2001 and in Iraq since 2003. Under these circumstances, Iran has formulated national security policies to cope with the apparent risk. Former President Ahmadinejad, on various occasions, called the U.S. and Israel imperialistic forces and vowed that Iran would continue its resistance against these forces. In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2011, he accused the West of "being full of hypocrisy and deceit," "tolerating the drug trade and the murder of innocent people," and "pursing imperialistic ambitions."<sup>20</sup>

Feminism was naturally perceived by Iran's regime as an ideology opposed to Islam. In Iran's context, national security policies are founded on resistance to the West, where feminism is rooted. Iran's government placed the importance of the family as the central ideology of Iran's political system. This system has focused on amending the norms and rules regarding the family increasingly toward conservatism.

How did women activists respond to this tide of events? The next section addresses this question.

### **3.2. Feminism in Iran: Aspiring to gender equality**

After submitting the Family Protection Bill to Parliament, women's rights activists from within and outside Iran raised their voices claiming that the Bill would further infringe upon women's rights. Before proposing the Bill, women activists had already taken issue with Iran's not ratifying the "Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women." Although Iran's Parliament approved the signing of the Convention under the Khatami Administration, the Guardian Council rejected it, and thus it was not ratified by Iran.<sup>21</sup>

Formal objections against the non-ratification of the Convention and protest movements against the 2007 Family Protection Bill were presaged by a demonstration in front of Tehran University demanding "gender equality" in 2005, with the reported participation of around 600 men and women.<sup>22</sup> On August 27, 2006, 54 women's rights activists started the One Million Signatures Campaign seeking the repeal of discriminatory laws against women, and they distributed a pamphlet titled "The Effects of Laws on Women's Lives" at Tehran's Haft-e Tir Square. The pamphlet listed eight demands. Among them were equal divorce rights for men and women, ending polygamy and temporary marriage, raising the age of criminal responsibility to eighteen years for both boys and girls, and the right of women to transfer citizenship to their children (such a provision was later passed in the same year). The demands also included equal compensation between women and men for bodily injury or death, equal inheritance rights, reform of laws that reduce punishment for offenders in cases of honor killing, and equal rights between men and women to give testimony in court.<sup>23</sup>

According to the accounts of women's rights activists, middle-class women living in new residential areas in Tehran and other big cities led the campaign. They also reported that the campaign eventually spread and gathered wide support from women in their 20s to their 60s, across different ideologies and social classes. This signature campaign is a significant event in the history of Iran's women's movement because it was the first one that promoted the slogan of "gender equality." The campaign merged into the Green Movement, which started with a recount of the votes cast in the disputed 2009 presidential elections.

However, how to evaluate the Green Movement has remained a question among scholars. Women's rights activists and Iranian researchers involved in the movement focused on how discriminatory the government's policies were against women, how much pressure the government exerted on the activists, and how the activists bravely challenged them. However,

it remains difficult to objectively measure how actively the Green Movement promoted the activists' demands to expand women's rights among the various other causes it supported. Reports by the activists are basically insider stories, which cannot fully inform a serious academic discussion.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the author believes that what is essential is not the actual circumstances of the women's activities in the signature campaign or the Green Movement, nor the nature of the rights being asserted. The question is why they had to stand against the political system.

Friction against the women's rights activists in Iran also existed during Khatami's reformist government. There was a massive increase in the number of civil society organizations. Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani (daughter of the late former President Rafsanjani) published the *Ruznāmah-i Zan* ("Women's Newspaper"), in which she promoted the importance of feminism. But the newspaper was banned within one year. Moreover, another women's magazine, *Zanān* ("Women") also introduced feminist views more often in the Khatami era. That was a time when feminism blossomed in Iran. However, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini pointed out, feminism in Iran was considered "harmful to society, a deviation from Islam, and dangerous as instigated under Western influence." Otherwise, feminism was labeled a ploy by the Zionists and Americans aimed at regime change, and feminists were thus subjected to suppression.<sup>25</sup>

In this environment, after 2005, the provocative remarks made by President Ahmadinejad worsened the conflict with America. Then, Iran declared that it would fight against the foreign enemy represented by the so-called imperialistic forces of the U.S. and Israel and leveraged the spirit of martyrdom nurtured during the Iran-Iraq War. In this context, Iran's regime tended to view all those who demanded empowerment as complicit with Western imperialism.

On the other hand, some women's rights activists in Iran chose a different path from the secular feminists who employed an antagonistic relationship with the state. One of them was Shahla Sherkat, the editor of the only existing women's magazine in Iran. Sherkat published *Zanān* ("Women") from 1992 to 2008, and during the Khatami era hosted round-table discussions between secular feminists like Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi and Islamists like Azam Taleghani. By doing this, Sherkat created a forum for discussing women's rights from both secular and Islamic viewpoints.<sup>26</sup>

*Zanān* had to cease publication in 2008 as the campaign and the Green Movement emerged and developed. It was during the Rouhani era that Sherkat relaunched *Zanān* in 2014 under a new name, *Zanān-i Imrūz*. While the magazine has often featured feminism, gender

equality, and other similar topics, it also dealt with various political, economic, social, and cultural issues involving women. Therefore, the magazine made itself distinct from other women's publications in that it did not centrally focus on feminism.

The next section analyzes how *Zanān-i Imrūz* developed its arguments on women's rights. The analysis clarifies how this approach differed from that of secular feminism, which was viewed as being in direct opposition with Iran's source of national pride, namely the resistance against imperialists and the spirit of martyrdom championed during the Ahmadinejad era.

#### **4. Objections from a global social awareness stance**

After six years remaining dormant, *Zanān-i Imrūz* gained a new license to publish and reemerged as a new women's magazine in 2014. The back of its front cover says "*Mahnamah-ye Ijtima'i*" ("Monthly Social Magazine"). However, soon after it restarted publication, this magazine was again forced to close after publishing a critique on the social phenomenon of "white marriages" in its 5th issue. After six months this time, it was again relaunched, and it addressed various topics on social problems occurring domestically and abroad as news reports on current events. From its resumption in 2014 to March 2020, *Zanān-i Imrūz* has published stories on a diverse range of domestic and international issues. Among these issues, particular focus has been given to problems often discussed in the post-revolutionary women's movement. The following section examines whether the magazine continued its legacy from the pre-Rouhani period or adopted a new approach.

##### **4.1. Cohabitation and Iran's marriage systems**

Iran has witnessed a phenomenon called "white marriages," which refers to the cohabitation of unmarried couples and is said to be increasing. Why is it called white marriage? Iranian citizens have ID booklets that are stamped when they vote in regularly held elections, such as parliamentary and presidential elections. These booklets are likewise stamped when a person marries and then registers the marriage. The page in the ID booklet indicating proof of marriage is left blank for cohabiting couples or those who live as married couples without registering their marriage. The blank page is white, and thus the arrangement is named "white marriage." *Zanān-i Imrūz* published a special issue dealing with the reality of this phenomenon in Iran.<sup>27</sup>

The first noteworthy thing about this issue is its cover page, which shows a young

couple walking together, each carrying equally sized bags. The suggestion of “gender equality” is conveyed on the cover, where cohabiting couples share equal gender roles.

As mentioned above, achieving complete gender equality is difficult under Iran’s Civil Code provisions. The concept of gender equality increasingly became accepted during the first term of the Rouhani administration, as one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In May 2016, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Shahindokht Molaverdi pointed out the importance of achieving the 5th SDG, “gender equality.” However, women’s rights did not significantly expand in terms of laws related to women during the Rouhani era.<sup>28</sup> The suggestive image of gender equality on the magazine cover symbolically reflected the editor’s intention. How was “white marriage” depicted in this special edition?

First, an article entitled “*White Marriage – Pain or Cure?*” (*Iztivāj-i Sefīd: dard yā darmān*), pointed out that “white marriage,” which is increasing in Iran’s urban areas, is based on volatile relationships, compared to legitimate marriage relationships. The article also clarified that this social phenomenon is rife with problems. The magazine then featured interviews with women in such a relationship to enable them to voice their side. Some women admitted that they wanted to have a legitimate marriage and expressed guilt at being in a relationship against their will because their “husbands” did not agree to marrying them legally.<sup>29</sup> One woman expressed her experience with her partner as follows:

I asked him until when we would have to continue in this kind of relationship. He replied that, although he agrees with marriage, he thinks it’s better to stay this way. I often feel self-conscious about what my neighbors think, when I leave home to throw out the garbage, etc. I can never tell my parents, who also live in this province.

This woman’s words indicate a sense of shame in knowing that cohabitation is not socially accepted. She could not tell her parents and family in her hometown that she is being frowned upon by her neighbors.<sup>30</sup> This article also emphasized how the woman expressed how she felt like a *sigheh* (woman in a temporary marriage). The article asserted that “white marriage” is not necessarily based on the free will of both the man and the woman but is in fact disadvantageous for the woman.<sup>31</sup>

“White marriage” has been criticized by hard-liners in Iran. Since they consider marriage to be a religiously, socially, and legally recognized institution, a union, according to them, should only be called marriage when legal procedures have been taken. Consequently, they even disagree with the mere notion of calling it “white marriage.”<sup>32</sup>

*Zanān-i Imrūz* was banned for a while after publication of the issue mentioned above. Then, it changed its cover along with the magazine's contents. The cover came to resemble that of a straightforward, academic journal. The contents ranged from topics on social issues such as water shortages, caused by drought due to climate change, to child marriage (particularly of girls in Iran) and street children—expanding the scope of its coverage to include Iran's development problems. Therefore, it shifted its focus from feminism during the time of *Zanān* to depicting development problems from a woman's point of view.

Iranians have been forced to live under much hardship due to the severe economic sanctions imposed on the country for the five years after the U.S. withdrew from the 2015 nuclear agreement, which is now essentially in deadlock. There is mounting dissatisfaction with the government, while the conservative hardline forces are gaining strength. Under these circumstances, *Zanān-i Imrūz* has been conducting comprehensive research on women's lives and has positioned women's issues in the broader spectrum of societal problems. The next section discusses the assertions made in *Zanān-i Imrūz* regarding the amendment of the citizenship law, which Parliament started to debate in the Ahmadinejad era and continues to debate today.

#### **4.2. Citizenship issue for children of Iranian women with foreign husbands**

As mentioned above, several laws are discriminatory to women in Iran, e.g., marriage age, filing for divorce, and inheritance. Another such law is discrimination against women under the citizenship law. Citizenship laws are generally based on citizenship by birthplace or by blood. But in Iran, citizenship is based on the paternal line. In other words, the citizenship of the child is determined by that of the father. Even if they are born in Iran, children born of foreign fathers cannot have Iranian citizenship, and thus they grow up without civil rights under the law.

There are at least one million Afghan refugees and workers living in Iran due to the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the war following 9/11 in 2001. Some statistics have shown that this number has reached up to three million.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Iraqi refugees have also been living in Iran due to the country's unstable political situation since the war against Saddam Hussein in 2003. Children born between Iranian women and these Afghans and Iraqis living in Iran have not been granted Iranian citizenship.

The necessity of amending the citizenship law—from the perspective that granting citizenship to children born in these circumstances implies the expansion of women's rights and the upholding of the children's human rights—has been discussed in past Iranian

Parliaments. A bill granting citizenship to children born of fathers with a foreign nationality has been deliberated since 2004. However, no progress has been seen in these discussions for fourteen years after the Ahmadinejad administration came to power in 2005.

*Zanān-i Imrūz* has tackled this problem in an article entitled “*So near, yet so far.*” Featuring numerous interviews with parliament members, the magazine presented a critical assessment of the various discussions made in the Iranian Parliament. The magazine published different views on the issue. It emphasized the need to grant citizenship to stateless and statistically unaccounted-for children because the current situation poses a national security problem for Iran. It also argued that they should be granted citizenship because citizenship based on paternity represents suppression of women’s rights as well as those children’s human rights.<sup>34</sup>

The need for amending the citizenship law was raised in the 1990s by Shirin Ebadi, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. Yet, one year after the article mentioned above was published, namely, in May 2019, the bill was passed in the Iranian parliament. It was then approved on October 2 of the same year by the Guardian Council, which is equivalent to Iran’s upper house. The persistent voice of the feminists finally bore fruit.

#### **4.3. The hijab issue: Toward a virtual world beyond national borders**

The hijab issue has been controversial in Iran since the time of the Pahlavi Dynasty. It has always been a point of contention between policymakers and civil society. When the hijab became mandatory after the revolution, many women’s magazines published different views about its propriety. However, as pointed out by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, discussion over the hijab in public was considered taboo for about twenty years after the revolution. It was only taken up by civil society after President Khatami’s reformist administration came to power in 1997. However, as an exception, Azam Taleghani made an unprecedented objection from an Islamic perspective against the compulsory hijab in an article in *Payām-i Hājir* (“Message of Hajir”), which was a pioneering women’s magazine after the revolution.

After the end of the Khatami era in 2005 and then in 2007, morality police were briefly mobilized to crack down on the improper wearing of the hijab in campaigns against “bad hijab.” But they failed to stop women from not following the prescribed hijab style. As mentioned below, although women’s rights activists had focused on issues related to amendment of the family law from the Ahmadinejad era, throughout the One Million Signatures Campaign and the Green Movement, and even up to the current administration, the hijab issue has been subject to active discussions, particularly online.

A famous example of this is the Facebook page for a movement called “*My Stealthy Freedom*,” which has many versions as to its origin. According to one version, it was started on May 5, 2015, by Iranian women living in exile in America. Posting pictures without a hijab on the Internet became a hit and caught widespread attention among women living in Iran. Some claim it turned into a movement that gained the support of almost one million people, although it is difficult to ascertain this claim.<sup>35</sup>

Women in Iran have not been strictly wearing hijab in the prescribed way since the latter half of the 1990s. Many of the women opposing the compulsory hijab belong to the younger generation. In Iran, where more than 60% of the population are under 25 years old, it is common to see women refusing to wear the “correct” hijab in urban areas. There are many ways women show their refusal to wear the hijab, not only by exposing their hair through their scarf but also by wearing short jackets and coats. In addition, some women adopt styles like body-hugging clothes that emphasize their figure or long-hemmed overcoats with the front buttons open as they walk on the streets.

This refusal to wear the hijab in the prescribed manner came to be regarded as a problem by the political system from around the end of December 2017, after the launch of a protest movement where women not wearing hijabs stood on platforms in the streets and waved their hijabs like flags. This movement has been called “*Girls on Revolution Street*.”<sup>36</sup> A video was made as a news report about the protests being shared on social media within and outside Iran, as well as the arrest of dozens of women who participated.

These images of protest have been shared among women in exile as well as the next generation of Iranians, and they have received messages of approval on social media. Thus, the issue of Iranian women wearing the hijab has elicited a widespread response, beyond Iran’s borders, in protest of its compulsory use. Although it is believed to have increased the sense of solidarity among women sharing the same sentiments, some suspect these protests have in fact been limited.<sup>37</sup>

Under these circumstances, *Zanān-i Imrūz* published an article entitled “*Rights and punishment of women not wearing a hijab*.” The article pointed out that there was no legal or social definition of what constitutes “no hijab.” It argued that without a clear explanation or criteria, the act could not be punished. It also criticized the political atmosphere that regarded the act of not wearing the hijab as a problem by questioning whether women’s hijab-less images posted on the Internet should be considered a violation of the law commanding compulsory wearing of the hijab in public.<sup>38</sup>

The article asserted that “the police cannot exert its authority in private homes and on

social media. Therefore, home parties and social media should not be considered a public place, unlike the streets.”<sup>39</sup> To further quote:

Social media is a virtual space and is different from the real world. The police can exert its authority in real, public places. However, whether women wear the hijab or not on social media is beyond the police’s authority because it is in the virtual realm. The state can exercise its authority in the real world, but not in virtual space.

*Zanān-i Imrūz*, therefore, asserted that punishment could not be imposed for private actions that occur in virtual space. It criticized the government’s censorship of the media, claiming that women not wearing hijab should be punished neither in Iran nor overseas.

The above articles express some of the most prominent viewpoints in *Zanān-i Imrūz*, which are important in the context of Iran’s current domestic affairs. We can observe from these writings that *Zanān-i Imrūz* has raised Iranian women’s rights in a global context. The article on “white marriage” included criticisms against temporary marriage, which remains institutionally recognized in Iran. It also portrayed the reality of cohabitation as a westernized lifestyle. Moreover, it featured women’s voices to highlight the disadvantages cohabitation presents for women from the perspective of gender equality—assertions that are different from those made before by Sherkat in the time of *Zanān*.

In *Zanān*, arguments on women’s rights were presented by featuring Islamic and secular feminists, and even enlightened *Ulamā*, mainly within the framework of the Islamic ideology of this Islamic republic. From its first issue in 1992, *Zanān* gradually deepened its feminist hue during the Khatami era. After the Khatami and Ahmadinejad eras, it took on a new perspective when it was relaunched as *Zanān-i Imrūz* under the current administration.

This new perspective can be seen through its focus on global social issues that transcend the confines of Iran, such as the call for gender equality, western-style cohabitation, and international marriage—issues that have swept over Iran amidst the advances of globalization. By tackling the refusal to wear the hijab by Iranian women within and outside the country, the magazine widened its vision by focusing on Iranian immigrants in the West and the Iranian community connected through social media. This wider perspective also reveals glimpses of cosmopolitan ideas. As mentioned earlier, *Zanān-i Imrūz* did not only publish news and discourse about domestic affairs. It also focused on the existence of socially and economically vulnerable members of society, as a negative consequence of globalization and climate change, by drawing attention to Europe’s refugee crisis, water-related problems,

and human trafficking.

## 5. Conclusion

The demand for gender equality by women's rights activists is, in itself, a call for the state to end its denial of women's human rights and, moreover, can be regarded as a continuation of the demands the women's movement has made on the state in the post-revolutionary period. On the other hand, the more Iran was forced to adopt a hardline stance against external forces, the more it needed to assert that it does not have (in the language of Spivak) a "subaltern" existence in relation to the major powers to maintain the authority of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists. This sentiment was manifested in asserting the country's right to carry out uranium enrichment activities and in expressing its self-image as a "strong Iran" by taking pride in being a nation making progress in its scientific technologies.

This self-image of a strong Iran particularly conveys a display of masculinity. Both Iran's nuclear energy development and its missile development programs overlap the image of a muscular male. This image buoyed the patriarchal system and the Shiite Islamic value system and mentality. The logic of this power center considers the women's movement a dangerous social campaign as it seeks gender equality. Accordingly, we can understand why the women's rights activists advocating feminism and gender equality had to fight against the political establishment. As long as the Iranian political system sees the realization of gender equality—the goal of the women's rights activists—as a "western" value system, the feminist movement will continue to be treated as the "handiwork of imperialists" and subjected to intense pressure.

*Zanān-i Imrūz* attempted to transcend the starkly opposing views of the political system and the women's rights activists advocating feminism. This approach is distinct from the strategy taken during the Khatami and Ahmadinejad eras by the Islamic women's rights activists, who demanded the empowerment of women based on an interpretation of the *Qur'ān*. To put it simply, the magazine adopted a global social awareness rather than an Islamic or secular feministic one.

The Islamic Republic of Iran marked the 42nd anniversary of the Iranian Revolution in February 2021. Currently, Iran faces two major problems: the economic sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, its people's very survival, i.e., sustaining everyday life, is a critical issue for Iran. There is an increasing cry among its citizens for upholding the value of human existence over ideology. People have voiced their concerns about whether the state would listen to their opinions in civil society. The global social awareness perspective adopted

by *Zanān-i Imrūz* has upended the historical tendency of maintaining a distorted view of women's rights issues as merely matters confined to women. This political stance points to the disparity between the state's adherence to Islamic principles and the realities of civil society. It is also noteworthy that the global social awareness perspective has effectively contextualized the women's rights issue within a broad social perspective. Underlying this perspective is an attempt to highlight the problems that are fundamental to human survival, such as the rapidly increasing disparity between the haves and have-nots, divisions in society, water shortages caused by droughts due to climate change, and various natural disasters—not only in Iran but around the globe.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Arzoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009). Marianne Bøe, *Family Law in Contemporary Iran: Women's Rights Activism and Shari'a* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, "The International Connections of the Women's Movement in Iran, 1979-2000," in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interaction in Culture and Cultural Politics* (Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee, eds., Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 205-231.
- <sup>4</sup> Majid Shafī, *Imagining Iran: The Tragedy of Subaltern Nationalism*, Lexington Books, 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Alireza Asgharzadeh, "The Return of the Subaltern: International Education and Politics of Voice," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 12-4 (2007), 334-363.
- <sup>7</sup> Tina Davidson, Ruth roach Pierson, "Voices from the Margins: Subaltern Women Speak and Rewrite History," *Journal of Women's History* 13-2 (Summer 2001), 169-179.
- <sup>8</sup> Semira N. Nikou, TimeLine of Iran's Nuclear Activities, United States Institute of Peace, 2015. [<https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/201806/Timeline%20of%20Iran's%20Nuclear%20Activities%20June%202018.pdf>] (Accessed on July 20, 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> Former President Ahmadinejad was known for appointing former members of the Revolutionary Guard to critical positions in his administration and tolerated the expansion of the Revolutionary Guard's influence in Iran's politics and economics in 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> These manifestations of the national identity can be generally observed among conservatives, moderates, and reformists alike, but was particularly characteristic of the political and religious statement of the Principlists (*Osul-Garāyān* in Persian).
- <sup>11</sup> AM Haji-Yousefi, "Iran's Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: From Confrontation to Accommodation," *Perspective: Turkish Journal of International Studies* 9-2 (2010), 8-11. [<https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2010/Haji-Yousefi1.pdf>] (Accessed on May 20, 2020).
- <sup>12</sup> Transcript of Ahmadinejad's UN Speech, September 19, 2006. [<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6107339>] (Accessed on July 10, 2020).
- <sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Jane Yarbakhsh, "Green martyrdom and the Iranian state," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 28-1 (2014), 77-87.

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- <sup>14</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, "Power, Ideology, and Women's Consciousness in Post-revolutionary Iran," in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity* (Herbert L. Bodman & Nayareh Tohidi eds., London: Lynn Rinner Publishers, 1998), 82.
- <sup>15</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, "Islam and Modernity," *Aspects of Contemporary Iran*, Fubaisha, 2002, p. 177-181 (in Japanese).
- <sup>16</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, "Islam and Modernity," Fubaisha, 2002, p. 194 (in Japanese).
- <sup>17</sup> Marianne Bøe, *Family Law in Contemporary Iran: Women's Rights Activism and Shari'a* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 66-68.
- <sup>18</sup> Maryam Poya, *Women, Work, and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 65.
- <sup>19</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, "Islam and the Veil: Women living in Contemporary Iran," *Koyo Shobo*, 1996, p. 59-68.
- <sup>20</sup> "Iran's Ahmadinejad attacks West, prompts walk-out," Reuters, September 22, 2011. [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-iran/irans-ahmadinejad-attacks-west-prompts-walk-out-idUSTR E78L4XR20110922>].
- <sup>21</sup> Shahra Razavi, "Islamic politics, human rights and women's claims for equality in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 27-7, (2006), 1232.
- <sup>22</sup> Negin Nabavi ed., *Iran: From Theocracy to the Green Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- <sup>23</sup> Noushin Khorasani, *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010). The Parliament rejected the Bill on equal inheritance rights for men and women in 1998, but the law on inheritance was eventually rescinded in 2008. Also, in January 2009, the law allowing women to inherit one-fourth of land was approved.
- <sup>24</sup> Pouya Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution: The Green Uprisings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Noushin Khorasani, *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).
- <sup>25</sup> During the second term of the Khatami government, two secular feminists, Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi, were active as lawyers against human rights violations but went into exile in America due to various pressures.
- <sup>26</sup> Hisae Nakanishi, "Islam and Modernity," p. 185-192 (in Japanese).
- <sup>27</sup> *Zanān-i Imrūz* No. 5, Mehr 1393 (September-October, 2014), p. 5-19.
- <sup>28</sup> During the Khatami era, a women's magazine called *Zan* ("Women") was published as an advocate of feminism by Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani (daughter of the former President Rafsanjani). Still, the newspaper was banned within less than one year. "Feminism" is a concept that originated from the West and has been considered taboo in Iran until today.
- <sup>29</sup> *Zanān-i Imrūz* No. 5, p. 9.
- <sup>30</sup> *Zanān-i Imrūz* No. 5, p. 10.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Shahla Sherkat by the author (February 20, 2016, Tehran).
- <sup>33</sup> Alessandro Monsutti, "Afghan Migration Strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27-1 (UNHCR, 2008). [<https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article-abstract/27/1/58/1532871>] (Accessed on May 21, 2020).
- <sup>34</sup> *Zanān-i Imrūz* No. 32, Ordibehsht, 1397 (April-May, 2018), p. 19.
- <sup>35</sup> There is a website that currently uses this name. [<https://www.mystealthyfreedom.org/>] (Accessed on July 28, 2020).

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- <sup>36</sup> "Iran's Hijab Protests: the Girls of Revolution Street," BBC February 5, 2018 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-42954970/iran-s-hijab-protests-the-girls-of-revolution-street>] (Accessed on May 20, 2020).
- <sup>37</sup> Ladan Rahbari, Susan Dierickx, Chia Longman & Gily Coene, "Transnational Solidarity with which Muslim women? The case of the My Stealthy Freedom and World Hijab Day Campaigns," *Politics and Gender* 1-24 (2019). [[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335857578\\_Transnational\\_Solidarity\\_with\\_Which\\_Muslim\\_Women\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_the\\_My\\_Stealthy\\_Freedom\\_and\\_World\\_Hijab\\_Day\\_Campaigns](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335857578_Transnational_Solidarity_with_Which_Muslim_Women_The_Case_of_the_My_Stealthy_Freedom_and_World_Hijab_Day_Campaigns)] (Accessed on June 21, 2020).
- <sup>38</sup> *Zanān-i Imrūz* No. 21 Esfand 139 (February-March, 2018), p. 30-31.
- <sup>39</sup> In Iran, the police may break into home parties where men and women drink and dance together. This scene is portrayed at the beginning of the movie "*My Tehran For Sale*." Regardless of whether the film is a true story, it suggests that house searches could be enforced if police authority is used for the purpose of imposing Islamic morality.