RE-FRAMING MODERNITY IN AN IRANIAN CONTEXT:

WHY WESTERN CONCEPTS ARE NOT APPLICABLE IN EASTERN SETTINGS

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A study of the relationship between tradition and modernity and their relationship to gender in Iran in the late 20th century reveals unexpected coexistence. Tradition and modernity have typically been seen as two contradicting concepts, with tradition giving way to modernity over time. In this essay, we will examine if that typical pattern exhibited itself with particular focus on the progress of women's rights and freedoms in Iran. The idea that these two concepts are not mutually exclusive will be explored, specifically in regards to the progress of women's rights and freedoms within Iran. This paper attempts to provide the historical context that allows one to explore tradition and modernity to better understand the future of a modern Iran.

In the Western world modernity and increasing equality are often seen as going hand in hand. When it comes to the Middle East, it is much less clear as to whether modernity and equality are causes and effects of each other. In Iran, it is particularly difficult to determine a relationship between the two ideas. For example, women became a driving force for change during the 1979 revolution by demonstrating and becoming politically active. However, the aftermath of the revolution was highly restrictive to women. Many of the changes that had been made in Iran that were seen as progressive for women, such as outlawing the veil and raising the age of marriage for girls, were undone. After the revolution women were legally required to veil, women's rights in regards to divorce were restricted and the legal age of marriage for girls was lowered. Since the revolution access to education and literacy rates for women have increased, yet the opportunity to use education in the private or public sector remains limited to women.[1] The history of women within Iran is one that mirrors these examples. It is one that is full of

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[1] Todhidi, Nayereh. "Chapter 35 "Islamic Feminism": Negotiating Patriarchy and Modernity in Iran." *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*. By Ibrahim M. Abu-RabiÊ». Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 624-44. Print. P 630

promises and the potential for growth and equal rights for women, followed by a much more restricted and dismal reality.

This history will be examined in more detail, but first it is necessary to define modernity for the context of this essay. While modernity is one of the most important concepts within this paper, it is also the most difficult one to define. Modernity itself has different meanings depending on where it is being studied and who is defining the term. An approach most similar to the one Mark Elvin takes in *A Working Definition of Modernity?* will be used in this paper. What is distinct about Elvin's approach is that he uses a definition of modernity that "is not based on chronology, and so escapes the confusion caused by continuous updating (or, in other words, the pressures to treat what is "more recent" as thereby "more modern"), and (2) that it enables one to see societies as varying combinations of "modern" and "non-modern" elements, sometimes mutually supportive, sometimes mutually indifferent, and sometimes mutually hostile".[2] Therefore, modern societies will not look all the same since modernity is able to coexist with numerous other values. Elvin argues this when he claims that this definition of modernity "respects ambiguities that in fact exist."[3] Elvin goes on to clarify this concept using the example of freedom and police. He says that there is nothing inherently forcing a commitment to personal freedom as an aspect of modernity but rather that a police force, the existence of which is seen as an aspect of a modern society, in some instances may protect personal freedoms and in others may diminish the importance of personal freedom.[4]

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[2] Elvin, Mark. "A Working Definition Of Modernity?" *Past and Present* 113.1 (1986): 209-13. Web. o 209

[3] Elvin, 212

[4] Elvin, 212

The most basic definition of modernity is the numerous changes that have occurred within all aspects of society in modern times. Broadly speaking modernity is often, but not always, closely tied to the forwarding of power, development, democracy and industrialization. Dipesh Chakrabarty, who wrote about issues of modernity in relation to India, very effectively described the different ways modernity can take shape when he said, "Western intellectuals thought of modernity as the rule of institutions that delivered us from the thrall of all that was unreasonable and irrational… Western powers in their imperial mode saw modernity as coeval with the idea of progress, Nationalists saw it in the promise of development." It is important to note that modernity does not necessarily hold a strong position regarding social evolution or progress. While in the Western world modernity is strongly linked to progress and development,[5] these concepts are not necessarily always related or found to coexist outside of a Western context.[6] Because of this I will use the previously stated interpretations of modernity combined with an approach that creates space for both Iran's history and a form of modernity that embraces the culture of Iran rather than imposes that of the West.

One of the biggest issues that comes to light when studying the effects of modernity, or the modern era, in Iran is the relationship between modernity and the East. Modernity is a concept that first emerged in the West, when looking at modernity in the East one must also look at the ways in which modernity will look different from its Western form.[7] In The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought Leila Ahmed says that "reforms pushed in a

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[5] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Introduction." Introduction. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2002. Xix-xiv. Print.
p. xix

[6] Elvin, 213

[7] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 634

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native idiom and not in terms of the appropriation of the ways of other cultures" would be more effective in creating lasting change.

      While modernity may have as a side effect the advancement of women's rights, particularly in the East, it is still a concept whose framework has been created by men and as a result, the form modernity takes will be closely related to the thoughts and beliefs of the men in the place it is forming. Afsaneh Najmabadi argues that because men were the individuals holding positions of political, cultural and religious power at the time when the discussion of modernity began, it was inevitable that modernity in Iran would be linked with the thoughts and ideas of men first and foremost.[8] This raises the question of how modernity could truly mean progress for women if it is a concept dominated by men. These contradictions and many more lead to a society in which it is questionable whether the modern era has truly seen progress for women's rights, or whether the issues that women face have simply taken on new forms.

      In *Islamism, Nationalism, and Western Modernity: The Case of Iran and Palestine* Issam Aburaiya discusses another issue that is often brought up in regards to modernity and Iran; religion. As Aburaiya brings up, most Western definitions of modernity either directly state or imply a secularization of nation, stating that "we were told that with the gradual progress toward modernity, religion was supposed to lose its social and political roles, withdraw from the public arena, and transform itself into a private matter".[9] This is not the path that Iran has followed. Iran went through a period in which it appeared that the state was moving towards a more secular

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[8] Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: U of California, 2005. Print. p. 214

[9] Aburaiya, Issam. "Islamism, Nationalism, and Western Modernity: The Case of Iran and Palestine." International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 22.1 (2009): 57-68. Springer. Web.

design. That stopped with the revolution of 1979 when Iran became an Islamic Republic, an inherently and publicly religious state. Because religion is so closely linked to the state, when looking at modernity in Iran it is important to look at the different ways in which Islam has been represented in the last two centuries, both worldwide and in Iran.

The concept of 'Islamic feminism', while a Western term and therefore somewhat problematic, is an important one to know in order to gain more understanding of the environment in which women exist within Islam and specifically within Iran. Margot Badran defined Islamic Feminism as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm."[10] The Blackwell Companion to Modern Islamic Thought lists three main components that make up Islamic feminism: "Responding to traditional patriarchy sanctioned and reinforced by religious authorities, responding to modernity, modernization and globalization, and responding to the recent surge of patriarchal Islamism".[11] Nayereh Tohidi defies Islamic Feminism as a movement that represents an attempt by Muslim individuals to "reconcile their faith with modernity and gender egalitarianism."[12] Something of importance that Tohidi points out is that more than ever women who are participating in Islamic Feminism are those who are unwilling to give up or move away from Islam and as such need to be able to combine the two concepts. This is somewhat of a change from previous fights for women's rights in Islamic areas, but also brings up a potential issue; if a feminist is not concerning themselves with Qur'anic scripture and

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[10]Ahmadi, Fereshteh. "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context." Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 22.2 (2006): 33-53. Web. p. 35

[11] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 634

[12] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion*. 624

Islamic teachings then Tohidi argues they cannot be considered Islamic Feminists.[13] One of the leading beliefs behind the concept of Islamic feminism is the idea that in order for there to be any level of true equality between women and men, Islam as a religion must be reframed and practiced in an egalitarian way.[14] Fereshteh Ahmadi describes one way to reframe Islam into a feminism friendly religion by using "the classic Islamic methodologies of ijtihad (independent investigation of religious sources) andtafsir (interpretation of the Qur'an)." and "methods and tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc."[15] A key aspect of this approach is that it is one that involves the stories and experiences of women as opposed to prior forms of Islam that are based on the male experience.

While Islamic Feminism was not named as such until very recently, there are individuals in history who have argued for concepts and changes to Islam that fall under what is now called Islamic Feminism. As early as the Islamic Golden Age, 786 to 1258 A.D., there were individuals who were arguing for a restructuring of the rights and roles of women in Islam. The philosopher Ibn Arabi believed that women were capable of holding spiritual positions equal to men.[16] Another was Nana Asma'u, daughter of a well-known reformer who fought for the education of women later in the Golden Age.[17]

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[13] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion*. 631

[14]Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion*. 629

[15] Ahmadi, 36

[16] "The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society." Souad Hakim: Ibn 'Arabî's Twofold Perception of Woman. The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, n.d. Web.

[17] Mack, Beverly Blow, and Jean Boyd. *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*. Bloomington: Indiana U, 2000. Print.

As mentioned, the term Islamic Feminism is not ideal for a few reasons. There are two specific trains of thought that see the term Islamic feminism as oxymoronic. Those who practice conservative Islam and believe that Islamic Feminism is an impossible concept because Islam is, to them, a religion that clearly places women in a position below men and requires subservience. There are also those on the more liberal side who strongly believe in feminism and believe that feminism requires one to hold staunchly anti-Islamic views.[18] A separate issue with the term Islamic Feminism is that it is a term that was coined by "secular, Western based feminist scholars"[19] and therefore has a colonial history.[20] This colonial history, one which has emphasized ignoring or deriding local cultures, means that many fear that Islamic feminism could be forced into a path that mirrors Western feminism rather than one that leaves room for local cultures to develop as their own. Scholars fear that this Western path will be the only one to be seen as feminism.[21] Furthermore existing as a religious group within a term that was coined by secular individuals creates issues with creating true Islamic feminism. In regards to Islam itself there have been many different approaches taken in the past few centuries.

In the late 1800's a liberal or modern group of thought began developing with the goal of reforming Islam. This became an important school of thought when evaluating modernity and gender relationships in Iran. While the individuals who made up this group of modern Islamic thought were mostly male, it was also a group that was much more open to feminist ideas. The

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[18] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 631

[19] Ibid 632

[20] Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998. Print. p 14

[21] Abu-Lughod, 15

primary advocates for this concept were the new Islamic intellectuals, Islamic feminists and those who belonged to the educated and modern middle class.[22] Within Iran one of the most influential figures in regards to liberal Islam was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Worldwide, other figures within the movement included Egyptian scholar and liberal reformer Muhammad 'Abduh, regarded as one of the most important figures in the creation of Islamic Modernism, and Turkish political activist Namik Kemal.[23]

This idea began in the late 1800's and continues to exist to this day. It was comprised of a group of individuals who believed that political power should be gained and held through nonviolent means and should work toward the goal of a version of Islam that is able to exist in the modern world.[24] One of the main views of the group advocating for liberal Islam was the French concept of "*égalité* or the equality of all before the law".[25] Another view of this group was their belief that modern-day Islam should be distanced from traditional and radical Islam. Traditional, or conservative, Islam believes that a patriarchal gender structure is a necessity and that women's roles are limited to those of a mother and a wife. Believers in a traditional form of Islam also support sex segregated work and public spaces.[26]

According to Tohidi, Radical Islam also believes in sex segregation, dress codes for women and a limited role for women but in less strict terms than traditional Islam. Radical Islam

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[22] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 625

[23] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion*, 625

[24] Ashraf, Ahmad. "Iran's Tortuous Path toward "Islamic Liberalism"" *International Journal of Politics* Culture.And Society, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2001): 237-56. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2016. 239

[25] Ashraf, 240

[26] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 625

believes that both modern and traditional Islam suffer from moral decadence and that by

targeting this decadence, Islam can exist as a problem free religion.[27] Radical Islam is also

referred to as Islamism and those who practice this form of Islam are called Islamists. In *Radical*

Islam and Human Rights Values: A "Religious-Minded" Critique of Secular Liberty ,Equality,

and Brotherhood Clifford Geertz is quoted regarding the shift from traditional Islam to Radical

Islam or Islamism. He describes this move as a "movement from religion to religious-

mindedness, from Islam to Islamism, from a rather quietist, withdrawn, and scholastic immersion

in the fine details of law and worship, the ordinary piety of everyday life, to an activist,

reformist, increasingly determined struggle to capture secular power and turn it to spiritual

energy."[28] Tohidi mentions one of the differences between radical Islam and traditional Islam is

one involving the role of women. While radical Islam still pushes for a patriarchal structure and

limits the freedoms of women, it is a form of Islam that believes there are significant benefits to

allowing and encouraging the mobilization of women, both politically and socially.[29] As touched

on earlier the non-secular identity of Iran has caused questions to be raised about whether being

an Islamic Republic is enough to prevent Iran from being considered a state that is experiencing

modernity. It is important to consider that simply being a religious state may not be enough to

make this determination as Islam in Iran can and has taken many shapes. If Islam has been

successfully reframed in so many different variations, then modernity too is open to reframing to

fit specific contexts rather than being a one size fits all model.

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[27] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion, 626*

[28] Reinbold, J. "Radical Islam and Human Rights Values: A "Religious-Minded" Critique of Secular Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood." Journal of the American Academy of Religion 78.2 (2010): 449-76. Web. p. 453

[29] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion*, 625

These beliefs of radical and conservative Islam makes modern Islam, as a group, much more willing to accept feminist ideology and equal gender relations.[30] Not all advocates for liberal Islam were believers in complete equality between the genders, for example Muhammad 'Abduh, while a strong believer in Islamic reform, did not believe that women should be allowed to hold political positions and only believed that women should be granted access to elementary level education.[31] However, the majority of supporters of liberal Islam were more open to beginning discussions regarding the place and role of the woman in Islam, in part because this was one of the most effective ways to distance liberal Islam from conservative and radical Islam.[32]

The concept of liberal Islam was gaining popularity within Iran prior to the success of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. After the revolution, this branch of Islamic thought all but disappeared in Iran for a time and the conservative, or fundamentalist branch of Islam and the radical branch of Islam dominated the state.[33] This was embodied by new laws and regulations passed that restricted women's legal positions and enforced a strict dress code as well as the transformation of Iran into an Islamic Republic. In *Part IV: The Middle East Since the Second World War* Nikki Keddie and Oliveier Roy argue that the role the liberals played prior to and during the 1979 revolution was what caused Iran to become more of a "self-styled Islamic republic and a

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[30] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 625

[31] Von Kügelgen, Anke. "ʿAbduh, Muḥammad." Encyclopaedia of Islam. Vol. 3. N.p.: n.p., 2007. Web.

[32] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 625

[33] Ashraf, 242

constitution stressing Islam".[34] This was partially due to the fact that many saw the liberalization

of Islam as synonymous to the westernization of Iran, and those who supported the revolution

saw this as an incredibly negative and immoral goal.

Female members of the Islamic feminist group of thought were some of the strongest

driving factors of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In fact, women as a demographic have

historically been some of the most important in regards to challenging both social and political

norms in Iran,[35] as seen in the struggle against the Shah during the 1979 revolution. This

revolution brought out a higher political participation by women than ever before in Iranian

history.[36] The actions taken by women took many forms including the dissemination of news,

hiding and tending to wounded activists, participating in political rallies and marches and even,

for a few, taking up arms and joining the literal fight.[37] Women were such a strong political force

during this election because they viewed the Shah as a symbol of tyranny.[38] Additionally the

reign of the Shah was seen as one that supported a very one-sided distribution of wealth and

widespread corruption.[39] The reign of the Shah caused certain groups within Iran, specifically the

working class, to feel as if the westernization of Iran supported by the Shah specifically targeted

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[34] Keddie, Nikki, and Olivier Roy. "Part IV: The Middle East Since the Second World War." *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*. By Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson. 2nd ed. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004. 615-56. Print. p. 628

[35] Ashraf, 248

[36] Abu-Lughod, 232

[37] Tohidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism 251*

[38] Ibid. 251

[39] Tohidi, Nayereh. "Chapter 6: Modernity, Islamization, and Women in Iran." *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*. By Valentine M. Moghadam. London: Published for the United Nations U World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU/WIDER) by Zed, 1994. N. pag. Print. p. 123

their lifestyles and beliefs.[40] In her memoir *The Lonely War: One Woman's Account of the Struggle for Modern Iran,* Nazila Fathi discusses the feeling that many Iranians expressed; the feeling that the Shah had robbed the people of their religious identity.[41] This combined with the fact that the westernization implemented by the Shah had made few changes in regards to the needs of women helped lead to a high degree of participation by women in the revolution and strong female support for Khomeini. Fathi describes one of the reasons that women, particularly conservative mothers, supported Khomeini and the revolution was because the idea of sending their daughters into schools or the work force was much more appealing when those places were segregated by gender.[42] This is a common theme not just in Iran but in many countries that experienced increased amounts of veiling. In *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* mentions that for some women, burqas were a positive and liberating garment because "it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men".[43] This belief made Khomeini a desirable alternative to the Shah for many Iranians.

This involved political participation by women led to a complete change in Khomeini's public statements regarding women's role in politics. Previously, in 1963, when the Shah gave women the right to vote, Khomeini was quoted "by granting voting rights to women, the

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[40] Tohidi, Nayereh. "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran." *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991. 251-67. Print. 256

[41] Fathi, Nazila. *The Lonely War: One Woman's Account of the Struggle for Modern Iran*. New York: Basic , a Member of the Perseus Group, 2014. Print. p x

[42] Fathi, X

[43] Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." American Anthropologist 104.3 (2002): 783-90. Sept. 2002. Web.

government has disregarded Islam and has caused anxiety among the Ulama and other Muslims".[44] By the revolution of 1979, due to the number of women who had become involved in the revolution, Khomeini had changed his public stance significantly and was quoted saying that "Women have the right to intervene in politics. It is their duty… Islam is a political religion. In Islam, everything, even prayer, is political."[45] Much of Khomeini's support for women to participate politically can still be drawn back, ultimately, to men. Khomeini expressed views that the reason it was so crucial for women to participate politically and become voters was because the participation of women in this realm serves to increase the participation of men, for "men cannot remain indifferent when women take part in the movement."[46] These ideas being put forth by Khomeini led to a situation in which women's civil rights were very much restricted, but their political rights were on par with those of men. Women were allowed to both vote and run for office, however their dress and access to the public sphere were limited by the government.

Leading up to the revolution the 'enemy' to Iran was seen as the current regime, viewed as puppets for Western governments. Keddie discusses a common belief held at that time, that in order to go back to true Iranian values the regime must be overthrown.[47] Following the revolution of 1979 many of the influential women who had pushed for separation from Western values found themselves in a society that was just as, or more, restrictive than the one previously

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[44] Kian, Azadeh. "Women and Politics in Post Islamist Iran: The Gender Conscious Drive to Change." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24.1 (1997): 75-96. Web. p. 76

[45] Kian, 76

[46] Kian, 77

[47] Keddie, 630

in place.[48] After the revolution in 1979 Khomeini gave speeches declaring that women should wear the veil, but not that it should necessarily be legally required. The following year veiling became legally mandated for those working in government offices[49], and by 1983 the veil was mandatory for all women including foreigners and those in violation of this law could be punished legally by whipping.[50]

The aftermath of the revolution also had strong effects on the legal system. Once Iran became an Islamic Republic, the criminal code, which was previously secular, was replaced by a form of Islamic law based on 7th century sharia.[51] Strong limitations were put in place regarding women's access to divorce. The age at which a girl was allowed to marry was lowered, first from eighteen to thirteen and then even further to nine. Legally the value life of a man was considered more important than that of a woman. In *Until We Are Free* Shirin Ebadi, the first Muslim women to win a Nobel Peace prize, recounts the story of a family who came to her for legal advice. Their daughter had been raped and murdered by three men who were eventually sentenced to death. The legal code mandated that their lives were more valuable and the girl's and the family was told that they must pay for the executions themselves, which they were not able to do. As a result, the men were released.[52] Homosexuality and adultery were both legally punishable by death. Having and publicly sharing certain political beliefs was also punishable by

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[48] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women* 231

[49] Nasseri, Jolaina M. "The History & Evolution of the Hijab in Iran." Academia.edu. N.p., n.d. Web.

[50] Tohidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism* 253

[51] Ebadi, Shirin. *Until We Are Free: My Fight for Human Rights in Iran*. New York: Random House, 2016. Print. p. 6

[52] Ebadi, 7

death.[53] Wide-spread fear of the morality police was common. The morality police were the government employees charged with the job of enforcing Iran's code of conduct. While the morality police had power over both men and women, one of their biggest focuses was on enforcing the dress code for women. Ebadi recalls the frustrations of one of her daughters expressed every time Ebadi reminded her not to laugh loudly in public due to fear of attracting the attention of the morality police.[54] All of these represented significant restrictions on women's freedoms.

The restrictions imposed on women after the revolution extended into the public sector. Access to jobs within the legal sector was eliminated.[55] The majority of public spaces became sex-segregated including most educational facilities. Many schools for girls were closed because of a lack of female teachers, the only ones who could teach in a sex-segregated school.[56] The prominent beliefs by those in power, specifically Khomeini, were that the only position acceptable for a woman to maintain within society was the so-called traditional one as the backbone of the family. Women who were able to enter into university level education were banned from studying law, archeology, mining engineering, and geology. Furthermore, married women were completely banned from any form of education.[57] Shirin Ebadi had been working as a judge in the highest level of the Iranian court system prior to the revolution. After the revolution, she was told that she was no longer allowed to be a judge, but that she could work as

[53] Tohidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism*. 254

[54] Ebadi, 38

[55] Kian, 77

[56] Tohidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism* 253

[57] Tohidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism,* 253

a clerk in the court system. She says that the justifications she heard given for this included the belief that "women were fickle and indecisive and unfit to mete out justice which would now be the work of men."[58]

Women's ease of movement within Iran was also severely restricted. A woman was not allowed to travel outside of the house without the explicit permission of her husband and written permission from a husband had to be obtained in order for a woman to travel internationally or gain employment.[59] A further barrier to women's access to employment was the government declaration that any male employee would receive a salary increase of 40% were his wife to quit working. This was all done in the name of resolving what was seen as negative and harmful Western influence.

In 1980, Iraq, after years of border disputes invaded Iran, due in part to fears that Iran's new Islamic Republic would spread within Iraq. This war, which took place between 1980 and 1988 played an important role regarding progress towards civil equalities for women's rights post-revolution. During these years, the public image of the Iranian Muslim woman was one of the martyr mother or wife who lost male family members to the war. Despite this public image, women played a large role in the war as volunteers behind the scenes and as fighters in the southern and western areas of the war zone.[60] Women also became involved with the intelligence gathering aspect of the war.[61] The Iran-Iraq war created new opportunities for women to escape

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[58] Ebadi, 4

[59] Tohidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism* 254

[60] Kian, 78

[61] Koolaee, Elaheh. "The Impact of Iraq-Iran War on Social Roles of Iranian Women." *Middle East Critique* 23.3 (2014): 277-91. Web. p. 280

the private sector as they cared for families that had lost members in the war. During the war, however; conditions for women were arguably worse than ever, with the combination of limited employment access and the frequent loss of the heads of household and breadwinners in the family.

The aftermath of the war primarily helped women in Iran. The Iran-Iraq war created social roles for Iranian women that did not exist before the war and these roles pushed women to create a life that did not fall within the idealized traditional Islamic role of a woman that was limited to the house.[62] This change of social roles was accepted with more ease than had it occurred during a peaceful time because there was simply no choice but to have someone fill the roles that men who were fighting or had been killed had left open. The deaths of over 200,000 men during the war led to an increased number of women who did not marry, leading to an increase in the number of women who need to receive an education and employment in order to be able to provide for themselves. In the years following the Iraq-Iran war women's access to the labor force saw some growth bringing employment rates back to levels similar to, although still below, the days before the revolution of 1979. By 1993 the rate of female participation in the labor force was even higher, becoming three times what it had been during the years preceding the war.[63]

Twenty years after the end of the revolution Iranian women have seen increased access to the political realm.[64] The length of time to bring about this change in women's political presence

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[62] Koolaee. 288

[63] Koolaee, 84

[64] Afshar, Haleh. "Competing Interests: Democracy, Islamification, and Women Politicians in Iran." *Women and Fluid Identities* (2012): 166-89. Web. p 110

occurred for a few reasons, but arguably the biggest one was women's access to education. In the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the literacy rates for urban women were 35.6 percent and those for rural women were 17.4 percent. Twenty years after the revolution rates had risen to 80 percent and 62.4 percent respectively.[65] These increased rates of literacy combined with easier access to education for women did not translate immediately into increased access to the political work force; the rate of growth in that regard was significantly slower.

While the increased access to education eventually led to a higher representation of women in the work force and political scene, the initial reasons behind the presumed importance of women becoming educated also show the signs of a male dominated culture. One of the primary arguments used to begin a discussion on the importance of educating women within Iran was that the more educated a woman became, the better she would be able to serve in her role as the keeper of the house. The idea being that if a woman was educated instead of just being a mother and wife, she could take over as the manager of the house and ease the burden on her husband.[66] Another of the initial arguments for the need to educate women was that these women would in turn become mothers and thus become the first educators of their children. This was phrased as needing to happen first for the sons, and then "god willing" eventually for the daughters. This idea was followed often by the excuse that daughters could not be the current focus due to more important concerns.[67] The theme of women's rights needing to be pushed aside is one that is seen frequently in the fight for women's rights in Iran.[68] Even once there was

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[65] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 630

[66] Najmabadi, Remaking Women 97

[67] Ibid. 98

[68] Tohidi, *The Blackwell Companion* 629

a large push to educate daughters in addition to sons, the movement was lead almost completely by women.

When it came to women who were elected into the political sphere there was a faster rate of growth. During the 1980's there were only four women elected into the Islamic Parliament, by 1992 the number had risen to nine women.[69] On April 29th, 2016 that number rose to 17, the highest since pre-revolution years.[70] One of the key ways that this was accomplished was through presenting their demands in a way that correlated those demands with Islamic teaching.[71] While this seemed promising in and of itself, a trend arose in which the women who were elected into political positions were those who had relationships with popular or at least well known male figures within Iran. Of the elected female parliament members, two were the wife of a former prime minister and one the daughter of a prominent Ayatollah.[72] Women who were associated with disliked political figures suffered in the political realm greatly and found themselves lacking any significant public support.[73] Almost every female elected to parliament came from a very strongly and publicly religious family.[74] The majority of the women who were elected, and an even higher number of those who were reelected were those who were considerably more soft spoken about their political beliefs than their male counterparts.[75]

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[69] Tohidi, *Women in Iran* 140

[70] WITW Staff. "Record Number of Women Elected to Iran's Parliament." The New York Times. The New York Times, 02 May 2016. Web.

[71] Afshar, 110

[72] Tohidi, *Women in Iran* 140

[73] Afshar, 112

[74] Kian, 79

[75] Afshar, 112

Going so in-depth on the history of women's rights, particularly in regards to the revolution in Iran is important for two reasons. The first is that one of the strongest criticisms from people who argue that Iran is not a modern country is the lack of women's rights. For this reason it is important to understand the background of this claim. The second is because within the discussion on women's rights within Iran it is possible to see many examples of concepts being re-framed by those who are the most knowledgable about them, those who experience Islam, Islamic feminism and living in a non-secular state on a daily basis rather than by those who are on the outside looking in.

Another crucial aspect of women's fight for more equal rights combined with the ability to reframe previously presented concepts within Iran was shown in the discussion on Islamic Feminism that occurred after the revolution. It is the idea that Islam and the Qur'an can be interpreted in many different ways and the use of certain interpretations to either hinder or promote gender equality. This debate is full of many contradictions. While some individuals within the Iranian Islamic community declare that in Islam, Allah has forbidden the education of women, others argue that under Islam, Allah has made it a requirement for both genders to seek out education.[76] There were those that argued that the type of Islam preached and advocated by Khomeini was not true Islam but rather almost a separate religion created by Khomeini. [77] A prominent Iranian figure, Ali Shariati, gives responsibility of the restricted, oppressed image painted for women to Islamic culture, rather than Islam itself. He blamed the culture of poverty within Iran as the reason women found themselves with no alternatives than to remain in the

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[76] Najmabadi, Remaking Women 107

[77] Sullivan, Remaking Women 221

same roles they have always held.[78] Regardless of the contradictions, the simple existence of this debate is significant in that it proves that ideas are frequently re-looked at in regards to changing culture and ideas.

One of the issues that has arisen with regards to pushing for equal rights for women is the historical tendency for these ideas to be equated with the West and therefore with ideas of imperialism and colonialism.[79] In a similar fashion, the concept of modernity is also one that has been created and used primarily by Western academics. While Iran has seen itself undergo many of the changes that have become associated with the concepts of modernity and that would be seen in a modern country, and because Iran resists concepts perpetuated by Western states, it is difficult to see one of the changes that has become associated with the transition into modernity, gender equality and increased freedoms for women. If the term modernity is re-defined by non-western individuals then it is easy to see that Iran can be considered a modern country.

While I can draw on the words, theories and approaches of others about how to specifically reframe modernity in an Iranian, or even simply Middle Eastern context, on a personal level I can only suggest the most basic concepts. Beyond stressing the need for this re-framing and explaining why it is so vital that this re-framing come from those who are Iranian I cannot go into my own beliefs about the specific ways to do this because I am a Western individual who has no cultural, historical or personal religious experience beyond research on this topic. The most important aspect of re-defining modernity in an Iranian context is that it comes from an Iranian viewpoint so it would be hypocritical of me to try and hypothesize how I

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[78] Ibid. 219

[79] Todhidi, *Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism* 255

would personally go about this re-definition. I can, however, reiterate the ideas of Iranian and Middle Eastern scholars.

As Aburaiya mentions, there are Western scholars who see the Islamic Revolution as the ultimate example of an anti-modern society, due to the perceived idea that secularization is mandatory for modernity to exist.[80] Aburayia goes on to discuss the idea that, in fact, the 1979 revolution was an example of a modern revolution due to the role that the people played in forcing regime change, arguing that this is much more of a requirement for modernity than secularization. Shirin Deylami brings up what is a rarely discussed but very real factor when considering resistance to the idea of Iran as a modern country. In her journal article *In the Face of the Machine: Westoxification, Cultural Globalization, and the Making of an Alternative Global Modernity* Deylami discusses a significant issue with the Western roots of the term 'modernity'. Deylami writes that while Iran is a state whose leaders frequently reject westernization and Western ideas and influences, that does not translate into rejecting modernity as a concept, simply its roots.[81] While Jalal Al-e Ahmad does not give a concrete answer of what this new form of modernity, shaped by non-western beliefs and cultures, would look like he does specify that "history, culture and Islam must play integral roles" in this reconfiguration and that this reconfiguration must come from the people. Jalal Al-e Ahmad also specifies that a reframing of modernity to better fit an Iranian context would require those doing the reframing " (1) to

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[80] Aburaiya, 61

[81] Deylami, Shirin S. "In the Face of the Machine: Westoxification, Cultural Globalization, and the Making of an Alternative Global Modernity." Polity 43.2 (2011): 242-63. Web. p 242

acknowledge history, (2) to adopt a spirit of intellectual rigueur, and (3) to advocate self-representation in the face of westernization".[82]

Once the idea of modernity is re-defined and studied in a way that allows space for Iranian culture and history to influence the term as well as allowing the role that Islam has had and continues to have on Iran to be incorporated, I believe it will become apparent that Iran is easily a modern country. It is simply impossible to accurately study a country using a term that is only studied and defined by those with fundamentally different backgrounds and experiences than held within the country being studied. As has been seen with the idea of feminism when studied through an Islamic lens or even with Islam itself, terms and beliefs can always be re-framed depending upon who they are being studied by and where they are being studied as well as when they are being studied. While this does not mean that westerners cannot study and write about modernity in Iran, it does suggest that westerners should not be the ones who define the terminology within these studies as has been seen in the past.

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[82] Deylami, 259

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