

Iranian feminism: a comparative evaluation of its impact and future

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IRANIAN FEMINISM
A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF ITS IMPACT AND FUTURE

by

ANNA V. ESKAMANI

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science
in the College of Arts and Sciences
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Houman Sadri, Ph.D.

Abstract

For the casual observer, the term “Iranian feminist” is often considered to be an oxymoron. However, what seems to be an ironic juxtaposition actually holds a great length of truth: for over a century now, Iranian women have been marching, screaming, and fighting for equal gender rights—all the while embracing feminist ideals. In fact, “femininity” is a political symbol that has been influencing Iranian politics for over 150 years. From the very beginning of modern Iranian history, women have always played a pivotal role within Iranian history, constantly connecting the personal to the political. This research aims to explore this phenomenon as an independent movement and as one comparable to American feminism. Three main topics are explored: theocratic restrictions, culture, and globalization. There are three methods of research that I have utilized as resources for this study: previous studies, statistical data, and interviews. The purpose of this study is to understand why and how feminism is increasing within the anti-feminist regime of the IRI. This study holds both theoretical and political significance and is designed to predict the future status of Iranian feminism through examining the conditions of the past and present.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Mom—Nasrin Vishkaee Eskamani. She was an Iranian woman like no other, and has impacted my life in more ways than she will ever know.

Somewhere in the night sky, there is a star shining brighter.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was made possible by the support and guidance of my Thesis Committee, and especially that of my Chair, Dr. Houman Sadri. Without them this thesis would not exist.

I would also like to give thanks to my twin sister, Ida Vishkaee Eskamani. We're duo that will conquer the impossible, and I'm grateful to have her in my life.

And finally, I would like to thank The Beatles, for keeping me company on those many late thesis nights.

“And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
<i>A New Generation of Iranian Women</i>	1
<i>Hypothesis</i>	2
<i>Definition of Terms</i>	3
<i>Purpose and Significance of Research</i>	3
<i>Methodology</i>	5
<i>Literature Review</i>	6
<i>To Conclude</i>	15
Chapter Two: Theocratic Restrictions	17
<i>American Feminism</i>	17
<i>Iran’s Current Regime</i>	20
<i>Legal Code—Rejecting Misogynist Policies</i>	23
<i>Feminist Communities: Duality or Unity?</i>	25
<i>Interpretation of Islam—Creating a Feminist Perspective</i>	28
<i>To Conclude</i>	30
Chapter Three: Social Norms.....	31
<i>American Feminism</i>	31
<i>Iran’s Current Regime</i>	35
<i>The Case Domestic of Domestic Violence</i>	37
<i>Fashion as a Political Weapon</i>	40
<i>Sexual Freedom</i>	44
<i>To Conclude</i>	46
Chapter Four: Globalization	48
<i>American Feminism</i>	49
<i>Iran’s Current Regime</i>	51
<i>Education and Employment—Knowledge is Power</i>	52
<i>Global Technologies—The Power of Internet</i>	55
<i>Transnational Feminist Networks—Creating Global Movements</i>	58
<i>To Conclude</i>	60
Chapter Five: Conclusion	62

<i>Drawing Connections</i>	62
<i>Significance of Research</i>	66
<i>Areas for Future Study</i>	67
<i>To Conclude</i>	68

List of Photos, Tables, and Figures

Photo 134
Figure 163
Figure 264
Table 165

Chapter One: Introduction

A New Generation of Iranian Women

For the casual observer, the term “Iranian feminist” is often considered to be an oxymoron. However, what seems to be an ironic juxtaposition actually holds a great length of truth: for over a century now, Iranian women have been marching, screaming, and fighting for equal gender rights—all the while embracing feminist ideals. In fact, “femininity” is a political symbol that has been influencing Iranian politics for over 150 years.¹ From the very beginning of modern Iranian history, women have always played a pivotal role within Iranian history, constantly connecting the personal to the political. Though the Islamic Republic of Iran has instated a strict patriarchal legal system, feminist thought continues to expand, changing the social, political, and economic spheres of Iran.

Iranian feminism is often characterized as third-world feminism—a discipline of feminist thought that rejects feminism as a foreign ideology imposed on third-world countries. Instead, many scholars of third-world feminism see it as a movement indigenous to the region that has blossomed overtime as women struggled for equal rights within their own homes and societies.² Unlike western feminism, which has a history of being more individualistic, third-world feminism has a deep connection to family and nationalism.³ This has been witnessed several times in Iran’s feminist history; for example: during Iran’s Constitutional Revolution, women organized street riots, devised plots to boycott foreign forces and goods, and even aided in the destruction of a Russian bank. These actions were motivated by nationalistic pride, and yet qualify as feminism due to women’s simultaneous efforts to gain “equality for all citizens” and voting rights.⁴ To sum, Iranian feminism cannot be completely defined by American, or western

feminism—but Iranian feminists are extremely gender-conscious; they are without doubt utilizing strategies of American feminists to charge their own political and social agendas.⁵

The Iranian women of today bear no resemblance to the ominous black chador-clad women of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.⁶ To the contrary, today's new generation of Iranian women are donned in tight *manteaux* (a garment that covers the entire body), colorful scarves; fashionable clothes underneath, with rouge applied to their cheeks. These women are hip, modern, smart; and in my view, serve as a direct threat to the existence of the Iranian government.

Hypothesis

This research focuses on the role of feminist ideas (or thoughts) among Iranian women. I argue that the expansion of feminist thoughts in Iran is a function of theocratic restrictions, changing social norms, and globalization (of cultural values). I hypothesize that as these three independent variables increase, the dependent variable (feminism ideas in Iran) will increase. Therefore the relationship between each set of independent and dependent variables is assumed to be positive. I also expect that the relationships between each sets of variables to be very strong.

Consequently, this research will consist of five chapters. The first and last chapters are the introduction and conclusion. The middle three chapters each focus on one independent variable: theocratic restrictions, changing social norms, and globalization, respectively.

Definition of Terms

This thesis will involve the use of terms specific to international relations and feminism; and hence many of these terms need to be defined. For example, feminism within itself is often a misunderstood word. A strict textbook definition of feminism reads: “a doctrine advocating social, political, and economic rights for women equal to those of men; a movement for the attainment of such rights.” However, it should be noted that feminism is often defined by the individual, and therefore it is a subjective term with many meanings.⁷ Within my research, feminism refers to any women (or man) who identifies female oppression and takes action to change it. Furthermore, the terms “western” and “third world” are frequently used within political lexicon. These are terms of controversy that many have deemed as inadequate in describing societies within the twenty-first century. Due to the image of colonialism/imperialism that these words invoke, I have chosen to use them sparingly within my own research.⁸ When possible “developing country” will be used in place of “third world”—this is due to the fact that I feel the term “developing” provides a more accurate depiction of Iranian society.

Other unfamiliar words will be identified and defined as they appear within my research.

Purpose and Significance of Research

The purpose of this study is to understand why and how feminism is increasing within the anti-feminist regime of the IRI. This study holds both theoretical and political significance and is designed to predict the future status of Iranian feminism through examining the conditions of the past and present. Critical theoretical questions are answered, such as: What is Iranian feminism? How is it expanding, and why does it continue to grow? These questions produce

interdisciplinary answers that utilize the academia of several disciplines, including feminist history, feminist geography, and feminist legal theory. Also the feminist theory of “the personal is political” is analyzed and compared to Iranian feminism.⁹ In addition, every variable is explored through a comparative lens, giving the research a greater sense of relativity. Overall, this study will serve as an excellent starting point for future scholars, policy makers, and feminists as they pursue more directions of research.

Politically, there is much at stake. First, take this into consideration: Iranian women have constantly been perceived as protagonists within an extremely antagonist country. Though headlines based on the IRI tend to revolve around anti-American issues, such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism, reports about Iranian women revolve around more American-friendly issues, including their efforts to resist government oppression.¹⁰ With this in mind, it can be concluded that the women of Iran have evolved over time into figures of change.

If these feminist trends within Iran continue, and I suspect that they will, for sure it will become an issue of great policy importance within both international and domestic realms. In fact, in his first State of the Union address, President Barak Obama made a direct reference to the women of Iran: “...we support the human rights of the women marching through the streets of Iran...”¹¹ With this taken into consideration, it is apparent that the current Obama Administration is watching the status of Iran’s women very closely. Indeed, by recognizing Iran’s feministic population, the United States will gain an upper hand compared to the IRI, who is in fact ignoring the women’s movement.¹² Also, if Iranian women were to succeed in their feminist agendas, the government of Iran would be pressured to undergo reformation, which could result

in a more democratic Iran. Naturally, such an outcome would have positive ramifications for the entire Middle East and beyond.¹³ As stated before, feminism in Iran also holds true domestic policy power as well: As expressed in preamble of the 1979 constitution, the IRI hoped to use women as a tool to strengthen their political base. However, after thirty years the IRI has failed to achieve its mission of gaining mass female support; if the regime continues to fail in meeting the demands of Iranian women, the population will no doubt continue to protest.¹⁴ Ergo, if changes are not implemented, the IRI will implode from internal cracks within its own political system.¹⁵

Based on the most recent events of political upheaval seen within Iran, this last scenario is indeed feasible. With every voice of protest, the IRI becomes more strict and violent—one extreme example of this is the death of a young Iranian woman named Neda Agha-Soltan. Unarmed, Neda was shot and killed in the streets of Iran in 2009 by who we assume to be government officers. Through the use of social-networking sites, the world watched Neda's death in horror.¹⁶ Another example is the threats that Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi receives from the Iranian government for her work promoting women's rights.¹⁷ With such instances taken into consideration, I say this with complete certainty: Feminism within Iran is increasing; and the IRI is not happy about it.

Methodology

There are three methods of research that I have utilized as resources for this research: previous studies, statistical data, and interviews. Previous studies and statistical data would fall under the category of secondary sources. These resources were found through the use of library

catalogues and online databases. Taken as a whole, secondary sources include academic books, articles, personal memoirs, documentaries, and photography. Interviews fall under the category of primary sources. Ideally, interviews would be conducted in person and involve both scholars within the field of my study and actual Iranian feminists. However, doing so is not realistic—most Iranian scholars within the feminist discourse reside outside of my geographical range, and contacting Iranian feminists within Iran would be a liability for both me and the interviewee. Hence, I plan to conduct interviews through the use of email.

Overall, my research methods involved sifting through secondary sources and conducting primary research via email to support my hypothesis.

Literature Review

In the past, many scholars have dedicated their time to studying Iranian women and their social movements. Here, past studies are examined to provide a literature review for the research subject and its three main variables: the expansion of feminism among Iran's female population is the result of theocratic restrictions, including strict Islamic code, patriarchal interpretation, and forced veiling; globalization, including transnational organization and technology; changing social norms, including changes in culture, education, feminism, and sexuality.

In regards to theocratic restriction within Iran, most scholars tend to agree that they often serve as catalyst for feminist discourse. In 1993, Valentine Moghadam examined the 1990's transition from Islamization to Islamic feminism. She states that due to disappointment with the Islamic Republics' gender policies, a broad based movement for reform began; as a result, many leading female figures brought attention to Iranian women's rights.¹⁸ This disappointment was

due to the implementation of strict Shari'a law in the Iranian legal system, which Azadeh Kian-Thiebaut asserts made gender-sensitive Islamic women feel dissatisfied with their societal position. This motivated women to find a more modern and dynamic reading of the Islamic code. Kian insists that these women are not feminists in the western sense, but are gender-conscious and have utilized politics as an agent for radical change in women's status.¹⁹ In her research, Haleh Afshar provides examples of women reinterpreting the words of Islam. For example, Afshar examines Article 115 of the Islamic Constitution, which outlines the rules of running for President. It states that those running must be from "rejaleh siassi," which means political personages. But in the literal sense, this phrase is translated to mean political men. Thus, Islamic Republic leaders use this Article as a way of preventing women to run for president—Afshar describes how many women have reinterpreted this law, and have tried to break the barriers by running for president.²⁰ Also, an event that each of these scholars has brought attention to is the schism within Iranian feminism. Elaheh Rostami Povey categorizes Iranian feminism into two separate spheres: Islamic feminists and secular feminists. She insists that it was the contradictions of the Islamic state that led to this separation. However, she also brings attention to the notion of cooperation between these two groups. She concludes that these relationships are extremely important, and serve as evidence of discontent towards theocratic restrictions.²¹ In contrast, Hammed Shahidian concluded in 2002 that the potential of an Islamic woman reformer is significantly less when compared to that of a secular reformer. He finds their options to be limited, and asserts that as long as their efforts are articulated within the political and ideological confines of Islam, it will not create a fundamental change. Hence, Shahidian states that Islamic

feminists are made inefficient in an area that they themselves consider to be crucial—cultural politics.²²

Since 1979, the Iranian government has used religion as a political weapon for control. In 2004, the patriarchy system of Iran's government was challenged by Mahdi Ali Akbar's research. He emphasized the monopoly that men had on religion, and brought attention to the efforts of both Islamic and secular feminists to reclaim control of their religion. Akbar concludes that these women cleverly used conflict between various political factions to publicize the demand for female reform. This has not necessarily led to a homogenous women's movement, but it has resulted in an increased presence of women throughout all realms of Iranian society.²³ Despite efforts of Iranian feminists to eliminate the strict theocratic restrictions of their government, contradictions within Iran's political system still exist, according to Jaleh Shaditalab's study. Shaditalab stresses the contradictions of what is morally encouraged and what is actually practiced within the Islamic Republic. For example, Shaditalab points out that though women are considered economically independent, a woman needs her husband's permission to work and is generally restricted by male guardianship. In addition, women are responsible for child bearing, rearing, and socialization but lack custodial rights. Overall, the theocratic rules established by the government are contradictory and are fermenting women's desires for change.²⁴ With this in mind, Haleh Afshar makes a very interesting point with her research—though the Islamic government is contradictory to Islam, feminism is not. Haleh Afshar claims that Iranian women have demonstrated that there is no contradiction between feminism that respects choice and Islam that respects believers. Afshar used a quote from Fatemeh Haqiqat-Jou, a reformist Majlis representative to help justify her claim: "Islam is not

the problem. The problem is serious resistance from men from different classes and not only the clergy, who justify their patriarchal views with wrongs interpretations of religion.²⁵

In 2007, numerous in depth analyses of veiling in Iran were conducted. In her research, Hamideh Sedghi brought attention to the political power of the veil in Iran. She asserts that the veil is a symbol of a political power struggle between the state and clergy over women's sexuality. Sedghi goes on to say that today's Iranian women are pushing forward their own feminist struggles, making their presence known in the globalized world.²⁶ Zephi Begolo did a very similar study, leading her to an excellent point: While the Shah of Iran banned the veil as a symbol of modernization, Begolo asserts that Ayatollah Khomeini forced the veil as a means of blocking western consumerism. In this effort to block the effects of globalization, the veil became a walking advertising for a prescribed way of life—one of the Islamic path.²⁷ Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh once again bring attention to the two separate entities of Iranian feminism. They assert that the contradictions of the Islamic Republic have led to the formation of two distinct groups with two different agendas. First, are Islamic feminists, who favor a reinterpretation of Islam—Barlow and Akbarzadeh assert that Islamic feminists believe that it is the wrong interpretation of men that has resulted in a lower class for women. Second, are secular feminists, who favor a complete separation of Islam and state—this they see as the ultimate solution. Though the two groups are different in their goals, the research concludes that the two have a long history of cooperation.²⁸

Globalization in connection with transnational organizations, has resulted in an influx of feminist thought in Iran. The very beginnings of this international linkage can be found in

Maryam Elahi's 1997 study. Elahi examined the overall value of the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing for providing tools, mechanism, and opportunities for protecting the rights of women. Elahi focused on three basic areas: impact of the Beijing Conference, how the United Nations can continue to promote women's rights, and the responsibilities of government to implement the Beijing's Platform for Action. Elahi brought attention to one of the first major efforts to establishment transnational connections among women from all over the world.²⁹ In 2002, global and local forces interact, as seen in Nayereth Tohidi's article. She asserts that there is an emergence of local-global feminism in Iran, and this is evident due to the ongoing interactions among grassroots groups and transnational feminist networks. She further states that since the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have been motivated to make international connections for three main reasons: missionary and ideological, diplomatic and pragmatist, and integrative and networking.³⁰ Transnational organizations gained momentum in Iran with the expansion of technology. Asghar Fathi credits technology with having one of the greatest effects on global feminism. She asserts that technology has allowed Iranian culture to no longer be constrained geographically, and thus feminists have been able to develop collective ideologies and plans of action across borders.³¹ According to Shaditalab's new study in 2005, it is the informal media that is having the greatest effect on Iranian feminism when compared to state-run media. Broader access to the informal media sector, including the internet and illegal satellite, has resulted in changing values and expectations for women. This has also enabled women to enter the communication process, allowing them to partake in the conversations of the world. Shaditalab claims that this had led to an increase in the creation of non-governmental organizations and charities within Iran, many with women in leadership

positions.³² Fereshteh Nourai-Simone claimed in 2005 that hundreds of women are producing blogs and sharing their ideas in an Islamic Republic that still tries to limit women's expression. Nourai-Simone brought attention to the powerful use of the media within Iran, and its implications for the future.³³ According to another research study conducted by Moghadam, there are negative and positive implications of globalization on feminism. Though globalization has exacerbated economic and social inequalities, Moghadam asserted that it has also fostered the growth of transnational feminist networks. These groups have utilized the internet to build coalitions, lobby governments, and advance their feminist goals.³⁴ Babak Rahimi and Elham Gheytonchi examined the power of the internet in regards to its effectiveness as a political platform for opposition groups—especially women's rights groups. They claimed through their research that online activism has served as an extension for women's protest, and has provided a link to global non-governmental organizations and other transnational groups. The researchers concluded that Iranian feminists have been using the internet to publicize their efforts, including bringing international attention to the Million Signature Campaign.³⁵ In another research study, Moghadam took everything into account and examined the connections between globalization and social movements. Combining theory with empirical examples, Moghadam brought to center stage the physical and electronic mobility of feminism. Hence, globalization has promoted contacts between different cultures, leading to greater understanding, cooperation, and support for feminists.³⁶

When referencing Iranian culture, almost all recent studies have stated that there is a cultural evolution occurring in the streets of Iran. In 2002, Kian-Thiebaut examined this changing culture of post-revolutionary Iran. Heavily based on personal interviews, Kian asserts

that the implementation of Shari'a in the aftermath of 1979 resulted in the autonomization and individualization of women. Hence, women have mobilized against the Islamization of laws and institutions; reinterpreting Islamic law, and breaking away from the stereotypical image of Iranian women.³⁷ From Mahdi's previous research, he also asserted that globalization has resulted in a sense of individualism among Iran's women. Hence, the state's efforts to impose a collective identity on Iranian women as backfired as women attempted to find ways to integrate Western individualism with Islamic collectiveness.³⁸ Kian-Thiebaut conducted another research in 2005, this time examining the cultural shift of Iranian family structures. Using qualitative and quantitative methods Kian-Thiebaut asserts that the government's implementation of Shari'a and "Islamization" of the family institute was an attempt to reconcile the society and the patriarchal order. However, Kian states that this attempt has failed, due to the fact that Iranian women are changing. Several factors have contributed to this, including: increasing urbanization, higher literacy rates, higher education for young women, and women's increasing social, cultural, economic activities. Thus, Iranian women perceived themselves to be more than just wives and mothers—they now perceive themselves as individuals with independent identities.³⁹

One of the major cultural changes in Iran since the Islamic Revolution has involved the education of girls and women. In her 2005 study Shaditalab examined the expansion of girl's enrollment in education. She asserted that in areas of competition, such as taking entrance exams for universities, women tended to do better than men. She also states that on average, female university graduates have increased by 40% since 1994. This has also resulted in an increasing number of female employees with university degrees. She concludes that though men are still perceived to be more important the women in Iranian society, education has aided in uniting

women, and will no doubt allow Iranian women to be a movement for change.⁴⁰ Branching off this research, Mitra Shavarini uncovered reasons why more Iranian women are enrolling in university education. She asserted that there are four main reasons why Iranian women are entering higher education: refuge from controlling family environments, increasing their “worth” for marriage, gaining respect, and of acquiring independence. Shavarini concluded that the desire for higher education illuminates the challenges facing women in Muslim nations and highlights the ways in which these women are using state institutions to change their social status.⁴¹ Shaditalab also brought attention to the fact that sixty percent of University Students in Iran are female. In most cases, marriage is deferred in favor of higher education, and the rate of female employment is steadily increasing. Educated girls are defending their mothers’ from poverty, hardship, and domestic abuse. Shaditalab asserts that in many instances, men are becoming less educated compared to their children, thus altering the position of father from boss to manager.⁴²

Iran’s changing culture has allowed feminism to blossom. According to Minoo Derayeh, feminism was initially seen as a taboo and dangerous subject. However, globalization has enabled Iranian women to reexamine feminism, which led to many of them identifying with the movement and transforming it into a political agenda.⁴³ Afshar also asserted that Iran’s changing social standards has enabled a young generation of women to have an international perspective who, with the access to knowledge, are tearing away the veil of ignorance. These younger women are further supported by older women who are willing and able to educate and support them.⁴⁴ Hence, a feminist generation of older and younger women is emerging in Iran, according to Charles Kurzman’s 2008 study. Through the use of surveys and interviews, Kurzman asserted that many characteristics of the traditional Iranian women are evolving, including those within

the fields of education, employment, marriage, and child-bearing. He concludes with stating that the majority of the urban Iranian women he surveyed identified themselves as proponents of women's rights.⁴⁵

Iran's cultural revolution has effected two major areas of the feminist discourse—sexual politics and gender. Janet Afary examined these two areas in her 2009 book. Based on observations and historical documents, Afary claimed that it is the resilience of the Iranian people that serves as the basis of Iran's current gender and sexual revolution. These changing politics in Iran are promoting reforms in marriage and family laws, while simultaneously motivating women to demand more egalitarian gender and sexual relationships.⁴⁶

The expansion of feminism among Iran's female population is the result of theocratic restrictions—including strict Islamic code, patriarchy interpretation, and forced veiling—along with transnational organizations, and changing social norms, including changes in culture, education, feminism, and sexuality. Throughout all of the past research, there seems to be one overlying assumption: Iranian women are capable of creating social change, and feminism is one of many tools that they are using to do so.

Although past research has done an excellent job in exploring the vast topic of Iranian women, none have addressed the connection between government, globalization, and society. Each plays off the other; each reflects a part of Iranian history. These are the three factors that are propelling the growth of Iranian feminism into the 21st century. They need to be closely examined, and given more a global perspective.

The research topic that I have chosen to pursue complements past research incredibly well. Many scholars have dedicated their work to studying Iran's women's movement and analyzing its future implications. What's more, most research focused on Iranian women tends to reach a very similar conclusion—Iranian women are catalysts for political change. My research supports this claim, and will continue the effort to uncover more evidence surrounding the growth of Iranian feminism.

To Conclude

Overall, the goal of my research is to examine Iranian feminism more deeply, and analyze its expansion within an anti-feminist regime with a comparative perspective. The hypothesis states that feminist thought within Iran is increasing as theocratic restrictions, changing social norms, and globalization increase. Thus, there is a positive correlation between the dependent variable and all three independent variables. Based on previous studies, I am confident that my hypothesis will not be proven false.

As stated before, this research is divided into five separate chapters with the three middle chapters each focusing on one independent variable. Within each of these body chapters, a historical background to American feminism will be examined, along with a brief background of Iran's current regime. By doing so, I hope to fill in the global sisterhood gap between Iranian feminists and American feminists. Only through exploring each other's histories, ideologies, and strategies can we learn how to unite and create global change for women.

Approximately 50 percent of Iran's population is female⁴⁷; and out of Iran's university students, over 60 percent are women.⁴⁸ Based on these statistics, it is obvious the women are

needed for a sustainable Iranian future. If the feminist demands of these women are ignored, they will no doubt find ways to emigrate from Iran and migrate elsewhere—in fact, the current net migration for Iran is -2.62, meaning that more people are leaving Iran than entering.⁴⁹

Today, both locally and globally, we are witnessing a feminist backlash; ergo the term feminism is more than often being stigmatized. Some demonize the “f-word” and claim it to be threatening and deviant.⁵⁰ As witnessed in the past, numerous books and articles have been published criticizing the very existence of feminism. To illustrate, in 1998 Ginia Bellafante wrote a *TIMES* cover article titled “Is Feminism Dead?.” Bellafante essentially ignored all efforts of global feminism and concluded that the feminists of today are only a shallow media image.⁵¹ Writers like Bellafante are typically characterized as post-feminists; in essence they believe that the women’s movement has abolished oppressive institutions, and now feminism as a movement is completely irrelevant.⁵² I argue that feminism is not only alive, but it is thriving—especially within the confines of Iran.

If this research is not conducted, I fear that the global implications of Iranian feminists will be ignored, resulting in an era of ignorance towards Iranian feminism and lack of possible support for social change within Iran. Through history, qualitative analysis, and data gathering I hope to make this connection apparent to the rest of world.

Chapter Two: Theocratic Restrictions

In this chapter, the expansion of feminist thought in Iran as a function of theocratic restrictions is examined. I hypothesize that as theocratic restrictions increase, feminism will also increase. To provide evidence of support, historical background is presented, followed shortly by three key female reactions to Iran's theocratic restrictions: rejecting misogynist laws, creation of feminist communities, and reinterpretation of Islamic law.

American Feminism

Based upon feminist theory, American feminism (sometimes referred to as “western feminism”) is divided into three major waves: first wave, second wave, and third wave.⁵³

It is generally agreed upon that the first wave of feminism found its beginning in the United States suffragette movements of the late-nineteenth century. The focus of the first wave was to overturn legal, or de jure, obstacles to equality, with a focus on voting rights for women.⁵⁴ In an effort to strengthen support for women's suffrage, two well-known women's suffrage groups—the National Women Suffrage Association and the American Women Suffrage Association—combined forces in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association.⁵⁵ Despite the merging of two notable suffragette organizations, the goal of ratifying women's right to vote had still not been meant. As a result, feminism took an ambitious turn in 1913 with the founding of the National Woman's Party (NWP) by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns. History shows us that the NWP was much bolder than any other political party of its time.⁵⁶ Using strategies developed by British suffragettes, the NWP did what was considered the unthinkable, including picketing the White House of a war time President and staging hunger

strikes.⁵⁷ This boldness and determination ultimately resulted in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, granting American women across the nation the right to vote. It marked a triumphant victory for the long and arduous women's suffrage movement; and created the foundation for American feminism to grow upon.⁵⁸

Second wave feminism originated in the 1960s, and continued on through the 1970s. Unlike first wave feminism, second wave feminists found themselves addressing a wide range of social and political issues—including unofficial, or de facto, inequalities found within society.⁵⁹ Here is where the personal meant the political; accordingly the term feminism began to enter the media, while feminists themselves began editing their own forms of media, including the publication of *Ms.* magazine headed by second-wave feminist Gloria Steinem.⁶⁰ The second wave is also credited with establishing academic feminism, as several scholarly women began to conduct studies within the feminist discourse.⁶¹ Many feminist theorists argue that the second wave feminism still exists today; which has created generational tensions between second and third wave feminists.⁶²

Third wave feminism emerged in the 1990s, and continues on till this day. Often referred to as third wavers, third wave feminists are claiming feminism for a new generation that embraces and incorporates the diversity of all people.⁶³ Many feminists define the third-wave as a movement of contradictions and conflict, which allows a diverse collection of diverse women to unite and fight for change.⁶⁴ Third wavers understand that they have an advantage over previous waves—after all, women in the past have made great progress over the decades. This fact is both accepted and appreciated—but third wavers also recognize the importance of

continuing the feminist discussion into the next generation.⁶⁵ For instance, third wavers are reviving the second wave tradition and practice of consciousness raising.⁶⁶ This involves connecting women from various backgrounds to address the current issues of the global society. An assorted collection of topics are discussed; in the third wave there is no all-encompassing single feminist idea. In contrast, the third wave is a “multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multi-issued” movement.⁶⁷ Third wavers are activists in every form, and consequently they encourage “everyday feminism” among all women.⁶⁸ With the help of technology, third-wave feminism is considered to be feminism without borders, as women across the globe use the internet to spread feminist thought and build global sisterhoods. This has in fact resulted in several transnational feminist networks.⁶⁹

Iranian feminism is often characterized as third-world feminism—a discipline of feminist thought that rejects feminism as a foreign ideology imposed on third-world countries. Instead, many scholars of third-world feminism see it as a movement indigenous to the region that has blossomed overtime as women struggled for equal rights within their own homes and societies.⁷⁰ Unlike western feminism, which has a history of being more individualistic, third-world feminism has a deep connection to family and nationalism.⁷¹ This has been witnessed several times in Iran’s feminist history, for example: during Iran’s Constitutional Revolution, women organized street riots, devised plots to boycott foreign forces and goods, and even aided in the destruction of a Russian bank. These actions were motivated by nationalistic pride, and yet qualify as feminism due to women’s simultaneous efforts to gain “equality for all citizens” and voting rights.⁷² To sum, Iranian feminism cannot be completely defined by western feminism—

but Iranian feminists are extremely gender-conscious; they are utilizing strategies of American feminists to charge their own political and social agendas.⁷³

Iran's Current Regime

Prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran was a nation of monarchies. The last monarchy to rule Iran was the Pahlavi Dynasty—in 1925 Reza Shah ruled Iran; in 1941 his son Mohammed Reza Shah took over the throne.⁷⁴ Reza Shah and his son were both of Muslim faith; yet as Kings of Iran, they marched away from the Islamic ideologies and accepted western influences with open arms and open minds. No doubt, the two last Shahs' of Iran can be perceived as true dictators who wholeheartedly believed that the only way to save Iran was through control and westernization.⁷⁵ And so opposition parties were censored, and modernization efforts via transportation, education, and economy were made. Out of all western transformations that occurred in Iran during the Pahlavi era, perhaps the most contentious among religious elites was the changing position of women.

Though Reza Shah had no tolerance for oppositional groups—especially women's organizations—he and his government played an influential role in shaping the lives of Iran's female population.⁷⁶ Case in point, in 1931 the government introduced a series of changes to the marriage and divorce laws. This bill was passed in the Iranian parliament (*Majles*) and gave women the right to ask for a divorce and raised the legal marriage age for girls from nine to fifteen. Efforts to support women's public participation were also expanded; and large sums of government money and resources were invested into girl's schools. In addition, Reza Shah's daughter, Ashraf Pahlavi, headed a government-controlled women's organization called

Kaanoon-e Baanovan (The Ladies Center).⁷⁷ The goal of the Ladies Center was to depoliticize the women's movement while simultaneously creating an image of modernity for Iran's women—the latter being a major concern for the King. In 1936, Reza Shah unexpectedly banned the wearing of the veil for Iranian women. Ironically, this act had serious negative effects on the status of women. It gave the *ulama* (Muslim scholars trained in Islam and Islamic law) reason to accuse the women's movement as being against Islamic ethics; and it resulted in a split among feminists themselves. The unveiling of women transformed femininity into a socio-political challenge in Iran—something that still exists over seventy years later.⁷⁸

In 1941 the Shah was replaced by his son, who continued his father's reform movements. What is now known as the "White Revolution" altered the social and political lives of women dramatically.⁷⁹ For instance, in 1964, Articles 10 and 13 of the Electoral Law were amended to allow women to vote and serve in parliament—therefore giving women the opportunity to participate in the political arena. Family laws also experienced reform, granting women more rights in areas of property, divorce, and polygamy. Under the second Pahlavi throne, veiling became optional, giving women the right to choose their own clothing.⁸⁰ In 1975, the Family Law was further modified to grant women custody rights and abortion rights.⁸¹ In regards to Mohammed Reza Shah, two women were especially influential in spearheading women's reforms within his regime. First, the Shah was encouraged by his sister, Princess Ashraf, to support women's liberalization movements. And second, the Shah's third and final wife, Shahbanou Farah Diba Pahlavi, influenced her husband to pass reform laws. Empress Farah is often praised for her efforts to protect women and children from male-dominated social and family mores.⁸² Despite the efforts of Queen Farah, her and her fellow "appointed beauties" are

often criticized for only representing a select group of Iranian women, and as a result, they have been deemed as being more symbolic figures than genuine ones.⁸³ It should be noted that “representing a few” is a constant criticism of second wave feminists, so it is not surprising that Empress Farah and her counterparts would be labeled like so.⁸⁴

Overall, the Pahlavi dynasty created a system of government that abandoned traditional Islamic shari’a law for a more modern westernized society. However, the Shah’s secret police (known as SAVAK) and extravagant lifestyle isolated the royal family from their constituencies. As the Iranian people began to look for a new leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became their answer; after fourteen years of exile Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran, deeming himself as Supreme Leader.⁸⁵

And so the theocratic regime of Iran begins in 1979, with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) emerging from the rubble of the Islamic Revolution. From that year forward, the status of Iranian women began to decline significantly. Ironically, it seems that those women who fought the hardest for the revolution have sacrificed more in the name of the Islamic government than they will ever receive in return. Indeed, the Iranian women of today are facing extreme limitations to their social and political roles—all due to a revolution that was meant to accomplish the complete opposite. This source of frustration is helping Iranian women connect their personal problems to the greater political issues at hand; resulting in an expansion of feminism. It is also unexpected that theocratic restrictions—a government method of controlling women’s power—is in fact strengthening Iran’s women’s movement.

Legal Code—Rejecting Misogynist Policies

During the shah's regime, a woman's opinion was valued equally to that of a man. However, after the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters designed a patriarchal government that institutionalized shari'a law. Shari'a is the comprehensive body of Islamic laws that regulate the public and private aspects of Muslim lives. Under the rules of shari'a law, men and women are far from equals. To illustrate—Islamic family laws discriminate against women and girls, placing them in a subordinate position to men in the family. This position is then replicated in society as religion is used to justify the second-class citizenship of women in Iran.⁸⁶ Many devout followers of Islamic law consider shari'a to be far more superior compared to “corrupt” western laws; accordingly, ruling society with an Islamic fist is considered the best way to govern.⁸⁷

The institutionalization of Islamic and shari'a law shaped the gender laws of the Islamic Republic, and resulted in anti-women legislation. Ayatollah Khomeini played a large part in enacting these legislations. For example, in early March of 1979, the Ayatollah gave a lecture to a group of Islamic jurists and seminary students in the holy Iranian city of Qom. In his lecture, he asked government employed women to observe the veil within their work places. Additionally, Ayatollah Khomeini deemed the Shah's amended Family Protection Law as both un-Islamic and contradictory to shari'a; therefore rendered them as ineffective.⁸⁸ As a result, Islamic fundamentalists nullified the Family Law and denied a women's right to divorce and reinstated polygamy.⁸⁹ What's more, a Shari'a-based penal code called *Qessass*, or Law of Retribution, was established. *Qessass* legally devalued the worth of women; at best deemed them to be second class citizens under the law. In the case of a murder, for example, the family of a Muslim male

victim would receive higher compensation compared to a family of a Muslim female.⁹⁰ The IRI also announced in March that women are incapable, and therefore unable, to serve as judges or as political envoys. All of these misogyny acts were meant with extreme resistance—however, every demonstration of protest was violently silenced by the IRI. Soon, violations against women's rights seeped into other arenas, including cinema, theatre, fine arts, and music.⁹¹ Shirin Ebadi, once an Iranian judge but now an Iranian lawyer, activist, and Nobel laureate, described the situation best: "I compare my situation to a person on board a ship. When there is a shipwreck the passenger then falls in the ocean and has no choice but to keep swimming. What happened in our society was that the laws overturned every right that women had. I had no choice. I could not get tired, I could not lose hope. I cannot afford to do that."⁹²

As more promises made by the IRI were broken, more women became gender-sensitive. Forced veiling, along with sex segregation, made the gender rules of the Islamic Republic extremely obvious. Physically experiencing these restrictions created even more resentment among Iran's female population. Consequently, newly gender-conscious Iranian women expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction with the Islamic Regime, which in turn motivated them to take action against oppressive institutional arrangements.⁹³ It can be said that the IRI's efforts to eradicate the rights of women has in fact fueled their efforts to resist such attempts. As a result, women are on the defensive, while the regime plays offense. This has been witnessed several times in the past, with the most recent example being the One Million Signatures Campaign—a new wave of feminist activism within Iran.⁹⁴ A grassroots movement, the One Million Signatures Campaign began in 2006 with the goal of collecting one million signatures in support of changing gender discrimination laws within Iran.⁹⁵ Although the supporters of this

movement are often targeted as conspirators by the IRI, the campaign has not stopped.⁹⁶ With thousands of volunteers and at least fifteen active branches throughout Iran, the One Million Signatures Campaign is indeed a reactionary movement to Iran's misogynist laws. It is also an internationally recognized movement; in fact, the United States' *Glamour* magazine chose the women of the One Million Signature Campaign to be their women of the year in 2009.⁹⁷

Feminist Communities: Duality or Unity?

Iranian women are rejecting the country's misogynist laws—but there are different strategies of doing so. Today there is a split reform movement of two distinct feminist spheres: Islamic feminists and secular feminists.⁹⁸

For Islamic feminists, addressing the gender conundrum is seen as a theological challenge. These women emphasize the “misguided” male interpretations of Islam's holy texts—which they claim conflicts with the principles of Islam itself.⁹⁹ Their solution is to re-read Islam's holy sources, via *ijtihad*—the notion that allows for intellectual reinterpretation of Islamic texts. *Ijtihad* is the driving force of the Islamic feminist movement, and places Islam within a feminist discourse. Quintessentially, religious-oriented feminists have no desire to reject political Islam. In contrast, building a state to uphold Islam is perceived to have a positive effect on a Muslim woman's goal for gender equality.¹⁰⁰ However, arguments have been made against this claim. There are many scholars who believe that it is impossible for Islamic feminists to make progress in the field of women's rights. This is mostly due to the fact that Islam is often interpreted to be a heavily patriarchal belief system, and therefore an Islamic feminist is extremely limited in her reform efforts.¹⁰¹ This point is debatable though: Islamic feminists are

essentially using the tools of their oppressor to reject oppression; and so in many ways, an Islamic feminist has more of an advantage compared to a secular feminist—especially within the IRI. For example, an Islamic feminist debating Islamic law cannot be accused of treason. She is not rejecting the Islamic regime; in contrast she is simply questioning those aspects of the theocracy that are deviating from Islam.¹⁰² Under the IRI, an Islamic feminist has more credibility under the law when compared to a secular feminist. One noted example of Islamic feminism in action is Shirin Ebadi’s approaches to Iranian courts. She states: “I too had to draw on Islamic principles and precedents in Islamic Law.” Indeed, if Ebadi were to stray away from Islam, she could easily be accused of treason and arrested by the IRI—which has in fact already happened to her in the past.¹⁰³

Secular feminists offer a different route: in contrast to Islamic feminists, who use the texts of Islam as political tools for change, secular feminists advocate a complete separation of Islam and state. In fact, this feminist population sees the theocratic regime as being the central problem that Iranian women face. Secular feminists reject the concept of women’s rights being a theological debate, and instead perceive it to be an issue of power struggle. The government refuses to accept reform, in part due to fear of the established status quo losing power.¹⁰⁴ A key Iranian secular feminist is lawyer and activist Mehrangiz Kar, who points out that all critics of the current regime do not have freedom of speech; therefore no oppositional voices—whether they are religious or secular—will be recognized.¹⁰⁵ With this comment Kar is implying that Islamic feminists have the same amount of influence within Iranian government as any other women does—which is an extremely small amount. The situation between the IRI and the United Nation’s Convention of Elimination for all forms of Discrimination Against Women

(CEDAW) is a perfect supporting example of Kar's argument. CEDAW is in essence an international bill of rights for women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979.¹⁰⁶ Islamic feminists promoted CEDAW with the goal of showcasing Islamic Law's compatibility with women's rights. Though CEDAW was approved by the *Majlis* (Iranian Parliament), it was rejected by the Guardian Council—a theological body of twelve males appointed by the Supreme Leader and the *Majlis*.¹⁰⁷ This turn of events showcases Kar's point: all feminists are limited by theocracy.¹⁰⁸ The failure of CEDAW's passage also weakens the claim that Islamic Feminists have more authority within the IRI compared to secular feminists.

Despite the ideological differences between Islamic and secular feminists, the two groups are forming strong alliances. This is partly due to the fact that the two groups cannot afford to be separated. For certain, a division among feminists creates a much weaker force, when compared to a unified feminist movement.¹⁰⁹ Together, these two entities of feminism are challenging the Islamic regime's policies and pitting one governmental faction against the other.¹¹⁰

Indeed, the relationship between Islamic feminists and secular feminists is comparable to the relationship between American second wave and third wave feminists. These two American feminist groups have generational differences; therefore they have varying approaches to feminism, creating an aura of uneasiness between the two waves.¹¹¹ The main conflict between these two movements is “lack of communication, mutual ignorance of each other's accomplishments, and sometimes suspicion about each other's motivations.”¹¹² These tensions are quite similar to the original conflicts between Islamic feminists and secular feminists, as seen above. Today the situation is different, and now we are witnessing a growing intergenerational

and unified alliance among Iran's feminists. The One Million Signature's Campaign is an excellent illustration of this. The coalition of dualistic feminists that exists today is in part accredited to Iran's theocratic regime—for it was the patriarchal pressures of the IRI that motivated Iran's women to come together in the first place.¹¹³

Interpretation of Islam—Creating a Feminist Perspective

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the IRI has used religion as a tool of control. As stated in Article 20 of the IRI Constitution: “All citizens of the nation, both women and men, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria.”¹¹⁴ However, Article 4 gives the duty of determining what is considered “Islamic criteria” to the members of the Guardian Council.¹¹⁵ The Guardian Council was specifically designed to allow only one interpretation of Islam—it seems that the Iranian *Mullah*, or keeper of Islam, is instead playing the role as exploiter of Islam.

Both Islamic-oriented feminists and secular-oriented feminists are beginning to realize that men within Iran's government and society have a monopoly over their religion.¹¹⁶ After all, it was men who created the Constitution, and it is mainly men who are enforcing it. To illustrate further, reformist *Majlis* member Fatemeh Haqiqat-Jou stated that, “Islam is not the problem. The problem is serious resistance from men from different classes and not only the clergy, who justify their patriarchal views with wrongs interpretations of religion.”¹¹⁷ A key characteristic of American third-wave feminism is to be critical of your own beliefs and values.¹¹⁸ Upon closer examination, this is exactly what feminists within Iran are doing. They are being critical of the

theocratic restrictions, which are apparently based upon the dominant belief system of Islam. Hence, Iran's women are reclaiming Islamic texts—giving Islam a feminist perspective, rather than simply accepting the patriarchal interpretation. Case in point, Article 115 of the Islamic Constitution outlines the rules for selecting an appropriate presidential candidate. The text asserts that those running must be from “rejaleh siassi,” which means “political personages”. But in the literal sense, this phrase is translated to mean “political men”. Thus, men interpret Article 115 in a way to prevent women from becoming presidential candidates. In contrast, women are reinterpreting this law; making the election of a female president legal in their eyes.¹¹⁹ Many women have in fact tried to test the truth of the government's constitution by attempting to run for president. Naturally, these political gender-benders are always met with fierce resistance and rejection. However— this has not stopped feminists from cleverly using conflict between various political factions to publicize their demands for female reform.¹²⁰ Shirin Ebadi is a perfect example of this. An internationally respected lawyer, Ebadi realized early on that Iran's legal system was not completely legitimate. And so, she utilized the media to bring national attention to the flaws of Iran's justice system. Her cases would quickly turn into public issues; forcing Iran's judiciary to justify their decisions to the courts of public opinion.¹²¹ Even if Ebadi did not win her cases, she succeeded in raising public awareness; raising the feminist consciousness.

With more women applying a feminist perspective to the laws of the Islamic Republic, contradictions between what is morally encouraged and what is actually practiced within the IRA have become ever-more apparent. Here are two examples: One, Iranian women are encouraged to be economically independent, and yet under Iranian law, a woman needs her husband's

permission to work, and is overall restricted by her male guardianship. Two, for the last thirty years, the Iranian government has labeled motherhood as the most important job for a woman. And yet, in cases of divorce, Iranian women rarely retain custody rights.¹²²

Islam has been articulated in a way to block female participation in all areas of Iranian life. Though the theocratic restrictions are extremely contradictory, Iranian women have proved that feminism is not. Iranian women have demonstrated that there are no contradictions between feminism that respects choice and Islam that respects believers. Through their reinterpretation of Islam, Iranian women are beginning to realize that Islam and feminism can in fact coexist. And, Iran's theocratic restrictions have given women a reason to reinterpret the laws of Islam, which has led to long term feminist dialogue and consciousness raising—key to any feminist movement.

To Conclude

The purpose of this research was to identify how feminist thought is expanding within the borders of an anti-feminist regime. I hypothesize that a major contributing factor to this growth are Iran's theocratic restrictions, which were instated after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This paper focused on three core areas in relation to feminism and Iran's theocratic restrictions: misogynist legal code, feminist communities, and reinterpretation of Islamic law. These three subjects indicate how large of an influence Iran's theocratic restrictions have had on Iranian feminism.

Chapter Three: Social Norms

In this chapter, the expansion of feminist thought in Iran as a function changing social norms is studied. I hypothesize that as social norms increasingly change, feminism will also increase. To provide evidence of support, historical background is presented, followed shortly by three key reactions to Iran's altering society: domestic violence, fashion, and sexual freedom.

American Feminism

Social norms are specific cultural expectations for how to behave in a given situation. In essence, established norms provide order to a society; the social interactions they encourage are often consistent, predictable, and learnable. For example, when an individual approaches a line of people, there is an implicit norm to stand behind the last person, not barge into the front of the line.¹²³ Women have always been the subject of social norms-- for instance it was once a social norm for women to not be considered intellectually equal to their male partners; speaking against one's husband was seen as deviant behavior. However, since the emergence of feminism within the United States, social norms have been changing significantly, especially within the realms of politics, culture, and sexuality.

Political participation increased dramatically with the appearance of the first wave. As stated previously before, the first wave of American feminism began with suffragettes demanding the right to vote. Alice Paul and Lucy Burns founded the radical National Women's Party (NWP), a political organization with new daring tactics, which attracted attention and support throughout the country. Members of the NWP picketed in front of the White House of President Woodrow Wilson, who at the time was a war time President. Doing such things was

unheard of—and the women were in fact arrested several times for their attempts to bring attention to women’s lack of voting rights. It was finally in 1920 where women were guaranteed the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment. Ergo, first wave feminists broke the social norm of women being apolitical. As a result, political participation of female citizens, both as voters and as nominees, are considered social norms within the United States. Participation in the political system soon led to political activism, resulting in a cultural and sexual revolution among American women.¹²⁴

Culture is defined as “the values, symbols, means of expression, language, and interests of a group of people.” Those who have the most power in society are the individual or groups that determine the dominant culture within a society.¹²⁵ For most of American history, the group that has had the most power has been, and at some level continues to be, men.¹²⁶ Hence, every wave of feminism has challenged the norms of America’s dominant culture through de jure and de facto movements of change. In regards to de jure changes, first and second wave feminists have altered culture through the ratification of a women’s right to vote. This de jure change altered society, giving women a more equal voice within the electoral process. Furthermore, second wave feminists have continued the de jure battle with the avocation of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). First proposed in 1923, the ERA was designed to affirm the equality of both men and women under the law—thus far thirty-five out of the necessary thirty-eight states have approved the ERA. Hence, it has still not been ratified—but the fact that thirty-five states have approved such a bill illustrates how dramatically cultural norms are transforming. However, second wavers did succeed in accomplishing many de facto changes to cultural norms within American society. For instance, the role of men and women within the workforce and the

domestic realm has undergone a complete change since the second wave's conception in the 1970s. In the past, it was a cultural norm for the father of the house to be the breadwinner, while the mother of the house tended to the family. Today, finding such family structures is rare; and in contrast cultural norms encourage both partners to work inside and outside the home at a more equal level. Indeed, in some households we are seeing a complete reversal of gender roles—one where the man of the house tends to domestic duties while the woman finds work outside the home.¹²⁷

Moving on, the social situations in the home also involve the issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of coercive control, consisting of physical, sexual, and/or psychological assaults against a former or current intimate partner.¹²⁸ Domestic violence reflects into the field of family law. Half a century ago, domestic violence was not even considered a crime. It was simply invisible to the legal world. In fact, marriage—the notion that a husband and wife were one—indirectly gave permission to a husband to physically and emotionally abuse their wife. Hence, domestic violence in the United States was once deemed to be both permissible and acceptable.¹²⁹ Indeed, it was second wave feminists who brought attention to this issue in the late 1960s. Through daily activism, the formation of national organizations, and lobbying, domestic violence soon surfaced into United States law. The process really was from the bottom up: first local organizations form, then state coalitions, and then finally the formation of national advocacy organizations such as the Family Violence Prevention Fund. The proliferation of legal advocacy groups resulted in the culmination of case law, innovative legislation, and legal scholarship. Today we are even witnessing the establishment of specialized law school courses, clinics, and casebooks all revolving around

domestic violence cases. Even within the realm of undergraduate education, domestic violence has entered the course work, allowing students to earn both minors and certificates in related fields. In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), an Act that was reauthorized several times to fund a wide range of legal, educational, and service programs to assist battered women. Currently, there is even an International Violence Against Women Act; this legislation is currently under consideration. If it passes it would provide U.S. funds to help eradicate violence against women around the globe via the U.S. Department of State.¹³⁰

Despite the efforts that feminists have made to eliminate domestic violence, abuse within the United States still occurs within heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Two issues are at hand: protecting those that have been abused and preventing more women from being abused. Legal processes have been created to provide solutions to these issues—and yet feminists are still a long way from keeping all women safe. For sure it can be stated that second wave feminists have altered the way the world perceives domestic violence. What was once considered an accepted action by a spouse is now defined as criminal. Ergo, second wave feminists have altered the culture of domestic violence, thus evolving the social norms.

Finally, it was the sexual revolution that altered the way society viewed women, sex, and politics. Beginning in the 1960s, the sexual revolution broke many taboos and brought controversial issues out from the dark and into the light. These issues included contraceptives, pre-marital sex, pornography, and abortion. For sure, the advent of birth control pills, and other forms of contraceptives, gave women a new sense of freedom when it came to sexual activity. Hence, the social norm of women having sex for purely reproduction reasons began to shift into

women also having sex for recreational reasons. It was at this point where women began to realize that they had control over both their bodies and their destinies, leading them to view sexuality as a source of power.¹³¹ Even the media was in-tune with this movement—in 1962 *Sex and the Single Girl*—Helen Gurley Brown’s little book of sex advice—hit the shelves and became an instant success. Three years later, Brown took control of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, transforming it to *Cosmo*—a title synonymous with sexually astute and sexually active women.¹³² Sex soon became a source of power, and restrictions on such power became beginning points for sexual activism. This resulted in feminists calling for more sexual freedom and reproductive rights—with a special emphasis on abortion. Abortion was finally announced as a fundamental right to privacy in 1973, via *Roe v. Wade*. Arguably one of the most widely recognized Supreme Court decisions, *Roe v. Wade* struck down a Texas statute that criminalized abortion, giving women the right to choose abortion. Hence, abortion was no longer a potentially life-endangering, desperate, criminal, and stigmatizing experience. It was now a safe, legitimate, and health-related option. *Roe v. Wade* allowed women to be the agents of their destiny. Even today, the *Roe v. Wade* decision stands as a victory for second wave feminism.¹³³

Overall western or American feminism has altered social norms in the areas of politics, domestic violence, and sexuality. Iranian feminists are following their footsteps—and as changing social norms increase, feminist thought also increases.

Iran’s Current Regime

Modern Iran’s social norms have been dominated by the rules of Islam and those who interpret it. Ergo, men have always had authority within Iranian society, especially the *ulama*

(conservative Islamic male clergy). However, as more Iranians traveled and studied abroad, as communication technologies slowly began to connect Iran to the outside world, Iranian social norms began to appear less appealing to the population. Educated individuals who once ignored Iran's gender inequalities soon began to view the conditions of women as being both problematic and detrimental to society.¹³⁴ And so, in the 1905 Constitutional Revolution, women protested alongside men demanding for "equality of all citizens." Iranian women even marched unveiled, chanting: "Long live the Constitution, long live freedom... We must free ourselves from religious obligations to live the way we want!" Not surprisingly, the *ulama* denounced these women as prostitutes.¹³⁵

Despite women's political activism within the Constitutional Revolution, the new Constitution in 1906 did not even grant women the right to vote. In contrast, Article 10 granted women the same value as beggars: "Those deprived of the right to vote shall consist of all females, minors...fraudulent bankrupts, beggars, murderers, thieves and other criminals punishable under Islamic law."^{136,137} With this in mind, it is easy to conclude that social norms in Iranian society are hard to break.

Even with the crowning of a new modern King of Iran—Reza Shah—in 1924, changing the society's social norms was difficult. Reza Shah ruled autocratically for sixteen years; and he was heavily influenced by the Turkish experiment of secularization and modernization—a system he replicated within Iran.¹³⁸ And as stated in a previous chapter, in an effort to strengthen his hold over his country, Reza Shah enacted strict political censorship; silencing nearly all opposition groups.¹³⁹ Ironically, while the Shah was simultaneously shutting down non-

conforming organizations (including women's groups) he continuously enacted policies to "free" women, the most controversial being the banning of veils in 1936. This act made Iran the first Muslim nation to ban the wearing of the veil—and soon even the Shah's wife and daughter were seen in public dressed in more European attire.¹⁴⁰

Political debate and activism, suppressed under Reza Shah, revived in the 1940s as a paradoxical by-product of British and Russian military occupation. Ergo, political parties that were once forbidden began to reappear. Parliamentary elections and political controversies led to a new surge of nationalism among the Iranian people. It can also be asserted that the presence of British and Russian forces influenced Iran both politically and culturally. As stated in a previous chapter, as Iranian women witnessed the culture of other people, they began to mesh those characteristics into their own culture. As a result, women's right not only became more socially acceptable, it also became more feasible.¹⁴¹

The Case of Domestic Violence

Within any society, domestic violence is a major medical, social, and public health problem. In the majority of cases, the perpetrators are men and the victims are women. Violence in the home has generally received high levels of acceptance from within and outside the family. Compared to other forms of violence, family violence is considered both less serious and less prevalent. This is most likely due to the fact that past attitudes towards domestic violence have indicated that family abuse is a "private matter," one that is not discussed or identified outside the home. No doubt, this perspective is further supported by the patriarchal society that is Iran.¹⁴²

Overall, the Iranian culture is thought to have a high level of tolerance for violence, and especially for violent behavior that occurs between intimates. Acceptance, and at times encouragement, of such violence can even be seen in academic and popular literature.¹⁴³ Indeed, in the past few years, there has been an increase in reports of violence against wives—in fact in 2004, the National Survey on Domestic Violence Against Women (NSDW), which was conducted in 28 provinces throughout Iran, reported that 30% of married women experience at least one act of serious physical violence during their marital life.¹⁴⁴ In addition, studies have shown that an increase in domestic violence is not exclusive to any specific socio-economic status. In fact, all women at all social levels and ages are at risk of experiencing and/or witnessing domestic abuse—whether you are daughter or a wife, there is chance of being exposed to domestic violence.¹⁴⁵

To divulge either further into this issue, we turn to a study conducted in 2000. In the city of Sanandaj, 1,000 married Iranian women were randomly selected and administered a standardized interview and a 23-part questionnaire. The questionnaire included the following variables: age, educational level of wife and husband, the women's occupation, the number of children (and the number of sons), the age of the husband and wife at marriage, the length of marriages, the number of cases of spousal abuse, and the respondent's opinion on the domestic abuse and prevention of it. The results that yielded were staggering: 15% and 38% of the women responding to the questionnaire reported that they had been assaulted by their husbands within the last year 1 to 11 times or more, respectively. Economic problems were cited as being the common catalyst for domestic quarrels. Furthermore, there was a significant association between the husband's and wife's education levels and the frequency of violence—approximately 10% of

violence episodes occurred in a household where the husband held a higher level of education than his spouse. To sum this 2000 study concluded that there was a high frequency of physical violence against women by their husbands in Iran.¹⁴⁶ In 2002, another study indicated another possible reason for the high frequency of violence against women: a woman's acceptance of male dominance. Through another questionnaire dubbed the Abuse Definition Form, a woman's perceptions and opinions towards intimate partner violence were analyzed. The Abuse Definition Form was given to a random sample of 2,000 women, some who were defined as the "abused group" and "non-abused" group.¹⁴⁷ Out of the 2,000 subjects, 37.9% had a positive attitude towards male dominance, while 62.1% held a negative attitude. The overall findings of this research indicated a strong relationship between a women's perception of male dominance and her acceptance and tolerance of domestic violence. Those who held a negative attitude towards male dominance had a low tolerance of domestic violence. Hence, the majority of women do not tolerate domestic violence.¹⁴⁸

There is also the issue of children witnessing these events of domestic abuse. In fact, witnessing marital battering between parents is the most frequent form of initial exposure to domestic violence for children. Most parents are not aware of the consequences of their children's witnessing violence, yet others may simply be underestimating it.¹⁴⁹

Domestic violence is an issue that drives Iranian women to feminism. Today, with more Iranian women entering higher education, the perspective of male dominance is altering. In fact, one of the most common demands among Iranian feminists is to both modernize family laws and criminalize domestic violence and other forms of violence against women.¹⁵⁰ And since 2000, a

major topic of discussion within feminism press in Iran has been domestic violence—which is being described as a negative social issue and a violation of women’s rights. They emphasize, too, that existing family laws are at odds with the universal standards of equality and nondiscrimination embodied in international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).¹⁵¹

Domestic violence is still an issue that has yet to be solved in Iran. One can even argue that the Islamic Republic of Iran is only encouraging the use of violence through their own decision to sentence a woman charged with adultery to be stoned to death.¹⁵² However, domestic violence is not being ignored by feminists, it is in contrast fueling their movement. Shirin Ebadi herself has fought against domestic violence many times, and though she may not win over the Judicial Branch of the IRI, she does succeed in bringing global attention to domestic abuse in Iran.¹⁵³ With that said, the use of technology will, without a doubt, help bring an end to domestic violence in Iran. These global technologies helps foster the formation of transnational feminist networks—an issue that will be discussed in the following chapter.

Fashion as a Political Weapon

In 2010, a senior Iranian cleric claimed that women were dressed in immodest clothing were to blame for earthquakes. The cleric, Hojatoleslam Kazem Sedighi, stated to the Iranian media: “Many women who do not dress modestly lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity and spread adultery in society, which increases earthquakes.”¹⁵⁴ As stated previously, women in Iran are required by law to cover their bodies, from head to toe. Those who reject the law are deemed immodest. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has backed campaigns enforcing the dress

code, saying, "Those who have indecent appearances are sent by the enemy."¹⁵⁵ However, from my own experiences of traveling in Iran, it can be said that many women—especially the young, are ignoring these strict codes, using their choice of clothing as a politically-driven fashion statement.

Using fashion as a form of political defiance is nothing new to Iranian women. To put this in perspective, it was in 1936 with the first Pahlavi Shah of Iran, Reza Shah, that the hijab was first banned in public, thus forbidding women to freely choose their garb.¹⁵⁶ Reza Shah was determined to modernize Iran; and following Ataturk's reforms in Turkey, he attempted to use dress to superficially create a Westernized state. However, the act of forced unveiling was perceived by many to be, not liberating, but in contrast shameful. Many men and women refrained from leaving their homes because of this shame. Some women opted to sneak out at night with their hejab—putting themselves at risk of prosecution and abuse. In 1941, Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza, repealed the forced unveiling. Though he was repealing an unpopular law, the scar was already too deep; and the reintroduction of the hejab only emphasized the deep seated divisions that appeared under the Pahlavi dynasty. And so resentment began to build, and when millions of Iranian participated in the Islamic Revolution to topple the Shah. Women used fashion to express their discontent—in fact, thousands of women poured into the streets of Tehran wearing black chadors as an act of solidarity and as an act of defiance. Even the most secular of women abided by Islamic dress code—all in an effort to showcase their anger to the throne.¹⁵⁷ Their protests proved to be successful, but to their surprise, the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran once again reinstated Islamic dress code, making it mandatory to wear a veil in public in 1983.¹⁵⁸

At first, women did not take the law seriously. But day by day, more and more women came to the realization that their choice to attire had been stripped from them, once again.¹⁵⁹ The IRI took it a step further and created a moral police to enforce the new Islamic dress code. Women who did dress accordingly were subjected to police harassment, fines, arrests, and lashes. There have even been instances of women being shot and killed for not following the state-enforced fashion rules.¹⁶⁰

In 1997, the election of the popular reformist President Mohamad Khatami resulted in a more lenient dress code. As women's headscarves began to brighten in color and complexity, it also began to slip farther on their heads, leaving more hair exposed. Soon, flashes of painted toe-tails through open-toed sandals began to appear—a development that would have been unthinkable in previous years.¹⁶¹ However, this lax on Islamic code did not last long and a little over ten years later, the moral police are once again restricting what fashion a woman can adorn herself with. And yet, women are refusing to listen. In an act of defiance Iranian women are not only wearing what they want, but they are pushing the boundaries. *Monteux's* have become shorter and tighter, rouge on the cheeks become brighter; hair is bleached to mimic a European style (See photo 1). When I traveled to Iran, I was met with the same scrutiny. And yet, when a moral police told me to pull fix my scarf, I would do so only to place the scarf back in its original place when the officer left.



Photo 1: 2007 photograph taken of me and my family in Tabriz, Iran. Notice the colorful scarves and application of makeup.

Wearing tight clothes, colorful scarves, and makeup is not just an effort to be trendy. It is our way of expressing our frustration with a regime that refuses to grant its citizens an option of choice. In a 2007 enforcement campaign, Iranian women actually resisted the orders of moral police.¹⁶² Yelling back at them they were both frustrated and angry—but above all they were defiant. Fashion in Iran is a perfect example of the personal being political. These women want to express who they are through fashion, and in a country with strict censorship like Iran, doing so is an act of political activism. And as restrictions increase, more and more women will turn to feminist ideals to help those resist the government's efforts to halt change.¹⁶³

Sexual Freedom

The Islamic Republic of Iran initially limited access to birth control and banned abortions, a procedure that was permitted during the first trimester under the Pahlavi era. Ergo, the total fertility rate (TFR) increased dramatically—in fact, from 1976 to 1986, Iran experienced a population boom of 15 million people, bringing the country's total population to 49 million.¹⁶⁴ This increase in population was expected, given the fact that large families were a core revolutionary value—necessary to creating more soldiers to defend the country and its values.¹⁶⁵ However, when the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, the government faced a population explosion and a broken economy. Persuaded by these alarming numbers, the Ministry of Health obtained permission from Ayatollah Khomeini, and several other prominent Ayatollahs, to promote contraceptives. It was indeed Khomeini's decree, or fatwa, that finally reestablished the legal use of contraceptives. With cooperation between policy makers and religious authorities, Iran initiated their family planning program.¹⁶⁶

The main point of family planning was to decrease Iran's fertility rate, or population growth. In an effort to achieve this, several goals were established by the state: encourage birth spacing of three to four years, discourage early and late pregnancy, and limit family size to two children. To reach these goals, modern approaches to reproductive health were integrated into religious teachings and implemented as part of state health policy. Abortion, for selected cases, was reinstated.¹⁶⁷ Birth control was reauthorized in 1989.¹⁶⁸ And to ensure a self-sustaining program and a steady supply of birth control methods, both oral contraceptives and condoms were manufactured within the state. It should be noted that at the time, such industries were not very common within Iran's region.¹⁶⁹ And so, as family planning became increasingly more

common within both rural and urban parts of Iran, the TFR began to decline drastically. For example, in 1997 the TFR was at 3.6; and by 2000 the rate had reached 0.6. According to the 2000 Iranian Demographic and Health Survey, 74% of married women use some kind of contraceptive—a rate comparable to that of developed nations. It is difficult to find statistics regarding the usage of birth control among single women, but birth control was made to available to all women, so it can be assumed that their rates were high as well. The most popular method of birth control is oral contraceptives, followed by tubal ligation, intrauterine devices, and finally condoms. Ergo, the methods of contraceptives being utilized in Iran are extremely modern.¹⁷⁰

So it can be said that IRI succeeded in their family planning agenda. However, by making birth control more accessible, unintended consequences occurred. Women began to gain control over their reproductive rights, giving them room to ignite a sexual revolution. Of course, the IRI attempted to resist such cultural changes. The state tried to institute their own form of sex education, one that was more traditional.¹⁷¹ The efforts of the IRI can be compared to Michel Foucault's analysis of sexual prohibitions within seventeenth-century Europe. In his book, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that beneath the variety of sexual prohibitions during the Victorian age, there simmered a “veritable discursive explosion” around sexuality.¹⁷² What he means by this is that despite the efforts of government to ingrain sexual regulations into legislation, despite state intervention to control sexual conduct, the people still shaped a broader discourse of sexuality beneath the blanket of Victorian morality—or in this case, and Iranian government. With access to birth control, along with the growth of an industrialized and urbanized cityscape, women began to change their sex mores.¹⁷³ Today, both single and married

women expect greater level of intimacy and sexual gratification from their relationships.

However, this sexual revolution has been adamantly resisted by the IRI. The state will support health and education reform for women, but in no way will the state approve any legislation that curtails a males' presumed right to unilateral sexual pleasure inside and outside of a marriage.¹⁷⁴

As a result, battles for a more tolerant society towards a women's sexual freedom have emerged. Iranian journalists, lawyers, clerics, doctors, nurses, actors, film directors, fashion designers, college students, and homemakers have embraced this feminist movement and transformed themselves into activists. Many women have delayed marriage, or have decided to simply not marry at all. Some women actually feel that marrying is considered a suicide of their rights.¹⁷⁵ These shifts in the sexual mores of women, and the demands for more tolerance, have created a new threat for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Sex is not only a new political hot button within the country, but it is also a form of political change.

To Conclude

In this chapter, the expansion of feminist thought in Iran as a function changing social norms is studied. I hypothesize that as social norms increasingly change, feminism will also increase. To provide evidence of support, historical background is presented, followed shortly by three key reactions to Iran's altering society: domestic violence, fashion, and sexual freedom.

As these cultural mores begin to shift, feminism is being both more easily acceptable and accessible. Much like in the United States, a changing culture in Iran signifies a new generation of Iranians who want more freedoms within their society. The 2009 Iranian Presidential Election showcased this even more with the campaign of **Mir-Hossein Mousavi**. A pro-reformist

candidate, Mousavi was an extremely popular candidate among female voters. Besides his campaign promise of improving women's rights, Mousavi appealed to women because of his wife, Zahra Rahnavard. According to a male campaign worker for Mousavi, Zahra's participation in her husband's campaign was "the most extraordinary thing" because it was the first time in Iran's political history that a candidate's wife started to campaign.¹⁷⁶ Zahra's presence attracted female voters, and once Mousavi started to campaign with her, other presidential hopefuls began to campaign with their wives too. But Zahra took female involvement to a new level, and created a division within the campaign called "Turquoise Girls." A reference to the campaign's color of green, the "Turquoise Girls" were a specific aspect of the campaign managed by and for Iranian women—it truly marked a shift in Iranian culture, one where women's political involvement was both welcomed and passionate.

With all of this in mind, it can be said that the dominant culture established by the Islamic Republic of Iran is being rejected by Iranian women. The fact that so many women showcased support for Mousavi and Zahra is just one example of feminism growing within Iran's border. Indeed, women are finding ways to mold their society into one where domestic violence is resisted, fashion is politics, and sex is power.

Chapter Four: Globalization

In this chapter, the expansion of feminist thought in Iran as a function of globalization (of cultural values) is studied. It should be noted that globalization is a subjective term with many meanings. One textbook defines globalization as: “the increasing interconnectedness of people and places through converging processes of economic, political, and cultural change.”¹⁷⁷ In general, globalization reduces the distance between people on Earth, without physically moving anyone. Globalization is essentially the outcome of modernity—it appeared first in post-feudal Europe vis-à-vis colonialism, and then evolved into a truly global force in the twenty-first century.^{178,179} Indeed, once distant countries and regions are now closely linked through commerce, communications, and travel.¹⁸⁰ Globalization means that proximity is no longer an issue—the distanciation between space and time allows us to communicate despite our physical distances.¹⁸¹ Keep in mind that globalization is not a one-track road. Ideas are transferred back and forth from nations, creating hybrid cultures.¹⁸² In addition, the term culture refers to the norms of one’s society, including the customs, traditions, or values. Hence, communities of various cultures emerge from globalization, with feminism being one of the most visible and vociferous.¹⁸³

I hypothesize that as globalization of cultural values increase, feminism will also increase. To provide evidence of support, historical background on the issue is presented, followed shortly by three key changes resulting from Iran’s globalization evolution: education and employment rates, emergence of cyberspace, and the formation of transnational feminist networks.

American Feminism

At the very heart of globalization is the expanding role of Internet and communication technologies (ICTs).¹⁸⁴ In the 1990s the Internet evolved from a small scale government project into a huge commercial enterprise of cultural influence. The rise of instant communications through electronic mail (e-mail), texting, and the World Wide Web have created an international forum for discussion, debate, and social change.¹⁸⁵

Using ICT's as a form of digital activism is undeniably a weapon of choice for third wave feminists within the United States. Everyday computer and Internet access are fueling feminist voices and creating a vibrant global community.¹⁸⁶ However, negative aspects of ICT's within feminism should also be identified. First above all, not every woman in the world—or even in the United States—has Internet access. This digital divide reflects the economic divide among classes; and as a result, low-income women who lack access to Internet connections are being excluded from globalized feminism. For those women who do have access to ICT's, data verification is close to impossible.¹⁸⁷ For instance, many on-line publications have been more sexist, racist, homophobic, and hostile when compared to off-line publications.¹⁸⁸ This is most likely credited to the fact that the Internet thrives on connection—not human contact. So with no direct contact, people feel more comfortable in expressing themselves; thus opinions will be heavily voiced. If a writer is not hostile, then those who post responses to the article may very well be.¹⁸⁹ It should also be noted that Internet ethics do not bring emphasis to fact checking. Consequently, the majority of online texts lack credibility and accuracy; and so we must be cautious when utilizing ICTs.¹⁹⁰

When used correctly, the Internet is an essential organizing tool for feminists.¹⁹¹ By utilizing online features like e-mail lists, email-petitions, and social networking sites, feminists have the ability to spread their ideas and raise awareness across borders.^{192,193} The growing role of globalized technology has resulted in the term cyberfeminism—defined as “a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture.”¹⁹⁴ A bottom up approach, the main goal of cyberfeminism is to question the patriarchy of society via the Internet.^{195,196} One example of cyberfeminism within third wave feminism is the website “HollabackNYC.” HollabackNYC’s motto is “If you can’t slap him, snap him.” The site encourages women in New York City to post photos on their website of men who harass them in public.¹⁹⁷ Hence, marginalized women are finding a voice of protest through the Internet. Cyberfeminism is a global movement; even women in the Middle East have created their own forms of online feminist expression.¹⁹⁸ This includes the creations of zines, also known as independent publications of feminist thought.¹⁹⁹ Zines first made their appearance in the United States during the 1930s; and with the advent of the photocopier and Internet, explicitly feminist zines are being independently produced on paper and on the Internet (many take form as online blogs).²⁰⁰ Zines serve as a “collectivist means to promote women’s rights and agitate and campaign around feminist issues...”²⁰¹ With globalization of cultural concepts, third wave feminism zines are being exposed to women across the globe.²⁰² As Rahel, from Thaili Distro in the United Arab Emirates, said “We promote an underground press where there is none; literacy and awareness in a cultural wasteland. We believe in the f-word that feminism is not a dirty word and that the personal is political. We support passion over passiveness and other good stuff.”²⁰³

Iran's Current Regime

Due to its geographic location, Iran has always been exposed to the forces of globalization through invasions and cross-currents of influence from Europe and beyond.²⁰⁴ Modern Iranian women were first exposed to the forces of globalization during the nineteenth century. It was at this point where European forces penetrated Iranian society, and laid claim to Iranian land for several decades. European advisors, diplomats, and goods, were shortly followed by European ideals and life styles.²⁰⁵

As stated previously, the Pahlavi Dynasty was very open to the forces of globalization—as was evident in 1963 with Mohammad Reza Shah's "White Revolution." Only a revolution in name, it was in reality another attempt by the Shah to both modernize his country and strengthen his control over it.²⁰⁶ Women's rights were a focus within the White Revolution—and in that same year, Iranian women were granted the right to vote.²⁰⁷

Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters went on to condemn the Shah's White Revolution. In *Gharbzadegi*, loosely translated to *Westoxification*, Jalal Ali Ahmad targets women in his criticism against Iran's colonial relationship to the West; and accuses Iranian women as being the "embodiment" of a Westernized and corrupt state.²⁰⁸ Indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini—while exiled from Iran—fueled this extreme dislike for the Shah and globalization through his sermons and pamphlets.²⁰⁹ Hence, when Ayatollah Khomeini gained control of Iran and established the Islamic Republic, his first objective was to reverse "westoxification," leading him to isolate Iran from its former western allies. Strict censorship was instated, and over time relations with the United States disintegrated.²¹⁰ Feminist activism was both stigmatized and

deemed counterrevolutionary.²¹¹ Patriarchal nationalists accused Iranian feminists as being “westoxified agents of imperialism.”²¹²

This demonization of Iranian feminists still exists today; and yet the number of Iranian feminists continues to increase—in part due to the never ending and inevitable globalization of cultural values.

Education and Employment—Knowledge is Power

In September 1995 more than thirty thousand women from virtually every country in the world gathered in China to discuss the many issues and problems faced by the world’s women and girls. It was the largest meeting of women in history; and at the official United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, some five thousand delegates discussed the what their governments were doing to help women. There were at least five thousand workshops at this meeting—and yet one theme seemed to always reappear: the effects of globalization on women and girls.²¹³

Without a doubt, the globalization of cultural values has played a critical role in shaping the lives of the world’s women. Often, the women of developing countries are those who bear the burden of the global economy. These are the women are who supply the consumerism demand of richer nations by mass producing goods within sweat shops.²¹⁴ Although Iran is frequently referred to as a developing nation, its women do not play a huge part within the global textile industry, or any other hard labor industry for that matter. In fact, there has been a gradual shift of female employment away from agricultural and manufacturing sectors—especially within the export orientated carpet industry.²¹⁵ Hence, Iran’s women are move in a completely

opposite direction compared to their global counterparts in other parts of the developing world. This trend of economic development within Iran has been consistent with the country's monetary growth via large oil revenues, demographic transitions, and most importantly—rapid expansion of female education.²¹⁶

Many argue that Reza Shah's (the first Pahlavi King of Iran) most influential reform act was not his decree to ban the veil, but was instead his nation-wide modernization of Iran's educational system. Reza Shah encouraged universal education; giving both female and male students the same opportunities for educational attainment. In addition, students were heavily encouraged to study abroad—in fact, before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iranian students (male and female) were the largest group of foreign students in the United States.²¹⁷

Today, female students are outshining their male counterparts in more ways than one. To begin with, female literacy rates over the past three decades have increased dramatically. The amount of both urban and rural girls enrolled in school has also expanded, signaling that education has become more available for both higher and lower class women.²¹⁸ In addition, women have comparatively scored higher on the Iranian entrance exam (known as the *konkur*) when compared to men.^{219,220} For example, in the 2003-2004 school years, 1.8 million students took the *konkur* exam; and the majority who passed, were women.²²¹ Finally, when examining the population of first-year university students, over sixty-three percent of them are women; and over sixty-one percent of new medical students are women.^{222,223} For these reasons it can be concluded that Iran's female population has succeeded in breaking through the glass ceiling of

education, thus creating a new generation of more educated, socially driven, and politically active women.²²⁴

This new generation of educated Iranian women are asking more from society than they traditionally would. This is evidence of the expansion of feminist thought. For instance, based on a 2005 survey, the first concern for Iranian women was: “unemployment and job security;” and their last concern was “marriage”.²²⁵ Certainly this is a true reflection of the changing economy within Iran, which has made it increasingly difficult for a family to rely on one single income.²²⁶ However, it is also signaling a change of attitude among Iranian women from traditionalist to feminist. In fact, many Iranian women are choosing to pursue careers rather than find a spouse and marry early. As a result, Iranian women have entered the workforce in large numbers; and today we are witnessing a large population of professional women with careers and businesses of their own.²²⁷ In many instances, men are actually finding themselves less educated compared to their daughters and wives, thus altering the position of a father from boss to manager of a household.²²⁸

The Iranian government has been slow to respond to this growth of female employment. And in recent time there has been an increasing shortage of jobs, resulting in widespread unemployment among Iranian women. For those women who are hired, social and cultural barriers still exist; including double standards, unequal pay, and lack of promotions (glass-ceilings).²²⁹ This discontent among Iran’s educated female population is fermenting another feminist protest; women are demanding equality within the workforce. Without a doubt, the high education levels of Iranian women are fueling these feminist demands. Inspired by the realization

that knowledge is power, or *tavana bovad hark eh dana bovad*, as a popular Persian proverb phrases it, Iranian feminists have learned how to empower themselves and become independent of a man's income. For sure their demands for equality will only grow with their minds.²³⁰

Global Technologies—The Power of Internet

For these young and educated Iranian feminists, cyberspace has become a liberating territory. As stated previously, globalization through the use of ICT's are creating a world free of physical boundaries. The Internet is enabling individuals to transgress borders without crossing them.²³¹ Ergo, ICTS are opening up the doors for possible social change by breaking women free from traditional customs and practices.²³² Case in point: the IRI has continuously ignored the public's aspiration for civil rights and democracy. When Iranian women (and men) do resist the authority of the IRI, they are meant with brute force and in most cases, imprisonment.²³³ This has happened to several activists from the One Million Signatures Campaign, and it was witnessed a second time during the 2009 post-Presidential Election protests. Despite the risk of being imprisoned, dissident groups have persisted in fighting back by using alternate forms of communication—including the Internet, a forum that provides self expression with anonymity.²³⁴ And so, informal media—like the Internet and cellular devices—provide women with a new form of self-empowerment and independence, that lead many to discover and adopt feminist ideals.²³⁵

Blogs (similar to online zines) have increased exponentially within the IRI since 2001. This is no doubt a direct result of Hossein Derakhshan's work. A young Iranian tech-journalist living in Canada, Derakhshan published a user-friendly "How-to Blog" manual in Farsi and

made it freely available online. Shortly after, a young twenty-four year old educated Iranian woman started her first blog titled *Khorshidkhanoom* (Lady Sun). Her first entry stated: “For the voice of women to be heard and to write about whatever comes to mind, of things I like or dislike.” This blog is a perfect example of cyber-feminism in action. Soon, more young Iranians began their own blogs, creating a huge online blogging community known as “Weblogestan.”²³⁶ Within these blogs Iranian women write freely about feminism; they tell their own personal stories of outrage and frustration in order to discover ways to overcome them. For Iranian feminists their access to the globalized world is a form of consciousness raising—they are identifying what personal issues they face and are discovering political ways to create change. Iranian feminists have claimed cyberspace for their expressions of individuality and desire for freedom.²³⁷ These actions are almost identical to the tactics of third wave feminists within the United States.

The expansion of online feminism has resulted in a backlash of strict censorship imposed by the IRI. Intolerant of dissidence and abusive of women’s legal and human rights, the IRI has consistently attempted to block the websites of feminist bloggers. To illustrate, in 2006 the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance announced that all bloggers must register their web site with the IRI. Registration information includes one’s name, family name, and telephone number. No doubt, the IRI established this rule with hopes of stifling online intellectual debate.²³⁸ But Iranian women have resisted—and when the IRI shuts down a blog, the owner immediately moves her site to another location; and alerts her readers of the change within seconds.²³⁹ For example, between 2006 and 2008, the One Million Signatures Campaign website was blocked (and thus renamed) at least seven times.²⁴⁰

The IRI's reaction to the globalization of culture is typical, for globalization often results in two forms of social movements: non-violent with progressivism, and violent with extremism.²⁴¹ Within the Middle East, extremism is often referred to as fundamentalism. Hence, those who want to converse Iran's current patriarchal power structure see the globalization of new cultural values into Iran as being forms of Western imperialism. They perceive it to be cultural invasion more than cultural sharing.²⁴² Thus, the free flow of information that globalization and technology provide are deemed illegal, and as a result the IRI follows a post-traditional way of governing. Ergo, Islamic values are reinforced and states policies are defended feverishly.²⁴³ This is accomplished through many mediums, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and their paramilitary organization, the Basij, playing huge roles. The free flow of information that the Internet provides is countered with "official" government controlled media, including newspapers; television and radio stations. These are mediums of media that Iran's clerics hold a vested interest in—and in most cases oppositional forms of media are shut down.²⁴⁴ In fact, many Middle Eastern specialists argue that the Islamic Republic has often violated its own constitution by shutting down newspapers, political parties, professional associations, and labor unions.²⁴⁵ What is unexpected is that the IRI is mimicking how feminists are using the Internet through creating their own government endorsed websites to rally and recruit supporters.²⁴⁶ I suppose the phrase "of you cannot beat them, join them" rings true in more ways than one.

Despite the efforts of the IRI to censor all non-government forms of media, the informal media sector is growing: including the use of satellite television, cellular devices, and the Internet.²⁴⁷ With two-thirds of Iran's current population being under the age of thirty; with four

to seven million Iranians using the Internet, it is no surprise that Iranian feminists have become so sophisticated in the realm of global communications.^{248,249} Through voicing their political demands, Iranian women are in actuality, framing their lives. In sociology, framing is a term used to describe the “specific schemes of interpretation that allow people to perceive, identify, and label events within their lives that can become the basis for collective activism.”²⁵⁰ Hence, the informal media sector has become a forum for framing—it provides Iranian women the opportunity to connect their personal problems to those of others, which leads to collective political activism. This is in essence feminism at its best; also, this way of thinking supports the new social movement theory, a theory that emphasizes interconnections between social structures and cultural perspectives.²⁵¹ As globalization alters the way Iranian women perceive their traditional cultural values, new norms of behavior are being established. Including the acceptance of feminism as a way of life.

Transnational Feminist Networks—Creating Global Movements

Collective behavior occurs when normal conventions cease to guide people’s behavior—as a result, people establish new patterns of interaction and social structure. Organized and persistent forms of collective behavior are known as social movements; within Iran, several social movements are all occurring at once.²⁵² These include personal transformation movements, socio/political movements, reform movements, radical movements, and reactionary movements. Feminism engulfs all of these social movements, but in contrast feminism is defined as a global movement. Meaning that women, all over the world, are resisting oppression and struggling for equality within their local communities—and though the issues for women vary

from place to place, there is still a sense of global unity among feminists.²⁵³ This global unity is otherwise known as transnational feminist networks (TFNs).

TFNs are emerging as new ICTs make global connections both easy to establish and easy to sustain.²⁵⁴ TFNs are expanding: in fact, every day more women's organizations are joining a growing "virtual sisterhood" that is breaking barriers, building networks, and shifting power. Although each individual TFN embodies a specific set of goals and challenges, there is a sense of collective identity which contributes to the creation of strong feminist alliances.²⁵⁵ TFN's echo the world systems theory, which begins with the premise that no nation in the world can be considered isolated.²⁵⁶ And so, feminists must interact transnationally in order to achieve their goals. The idea of a "sisterhood" among nations dates back to at least the early nineteenth century; and it is something Iranian feminists have been attempting to accomplish since the Constitutional Revolution.²⁵⁷ To illustrate, the failure to gain women's suffrage in the 1906 Constitution led to the creation of numerous women's societies, many with a nationalistic and feminist nature. One of these organizations, the Persian Women's Society, called for support from British suffragettes: "The ears of the men of Europe are deaf to our cries; could you women not come to our help?" The British women responded: "Unhappily, we cannot make the British government give political freedom even to us, their country women. We are equally powerless to influence their action towards Persia."²⁵⁸ Ergo, even history has served witnessed to Iranian feminists reaching out to their sisters in other parts of the world.

In the globalized world, building connections through TFN's has become a necessary step in creating social change. TFNs protect individual feminist communities through

encouraging the adoption of international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.²⁵⁹ Also, TFNs play a critical role as watch dogs—they alert the world when injustices among feminist groups occur, and they speak for those who are silenced. Indeed, the world witnessed this in March 2010 when Iran’s feminists and activists called for a “day of solidarity.” As stated on their website, *Gender Equality for Iran*: “We invite all women’s rights defenders, activists, organisations, and networks worldwide to demonstrate their solidarity with the Iranian women’s movement and the broader movement for democracy in Iran by organising initiatives under the slogan “freedom and gender equality in Iran” throughout March 2010.” Indeed, feminist organizations from around the world showed their support by hosting a global action month.²⁶⁰

Feminism emerges as women discover their own identity within that of other women.²⁶¹ This is what is happening in Iran today; and no doubt as the number of TFNs increase, Iranian feminists will follow.

To Conclude

Globalization of cultural values has increased feminist thought within the IRI. Indeed, globalization has resulted in higher education and employment levels of women, increased use of technology, and a higher level of global awareness through the creation of transnational feminist networks.

Indeed, there are high stakes involved in Iranian feminism.²⁶² The IRI understands this, and their efforts to censor an entire nation of people reflect their insecurity and fear of social

unrest. The world knows what the IRI is trying to do—and in a sign of global unity, are reaching out to Iran’s population. For instance, in March 2010 U.S. President Barack Obama issued an online video message to the Iranian population. The timing of the video coincided with the Persian New Year—also known as the first day of spring. In the video, President Obama stated that the United States will “ensure that Iranians can have access to the software and internet technology that will enable them to communicate with each other, and with the world, without fear of censorship.”²⁶³ With this in mind, it is obvious that the current Administration sees Internet access has a crucial form of protest for Iranian people—it is indeed, the only way for Iranian feminists to express their discontent, build networks, and establish a foundation for change. As seen in the 2009 Presidential Election, Iranians know how to use ICTs; and by being exposed to the cultural values of other nations via globalization, Iranian women know what the IRI is trying to censor, and why. Without a doubt, the increasingly educated and tech savvy female populace of Iran will continue to look towards feminism for answers, with globalization making the access all the more easier.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Drawing Connections

Since its conception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has created an extremely disadvantaged position for women, characterized by severe gender inequalities.²⁶⁴ However, the policies of the IRI failed to remove women completely from the political sphere; and in recent times it is in fact Iranian women who are receiving national attention for their calls for democracy and gender equality.

The main purpose of this research was to explore this subject further and understand why and how feminism is increasing within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Focusing on the role of feminist ideas (or thoughts) among Iranian women, I argued in my hypothesis that the expansion of feminist thoughts in Iran is a function of theocratic restrictions, changing social norms, and globalization (of cultural values). It was also stated that as these three independent variables increased, the dependent variable (feminism ideas in Iran) would also increase, thus implying a positive and strong relationship between each set of independent and dependent values.

And so, the research took shape as five separate chapters, with the three main chapters revolving around each independent variable: theocratic restrictions, changing social norms, and globalization, respectively. These chapters were written in this order for a reason. Each variable catalyzed the next—the one after would not have occurred without the one before it. The following diagram provides an illustration of this relationship:

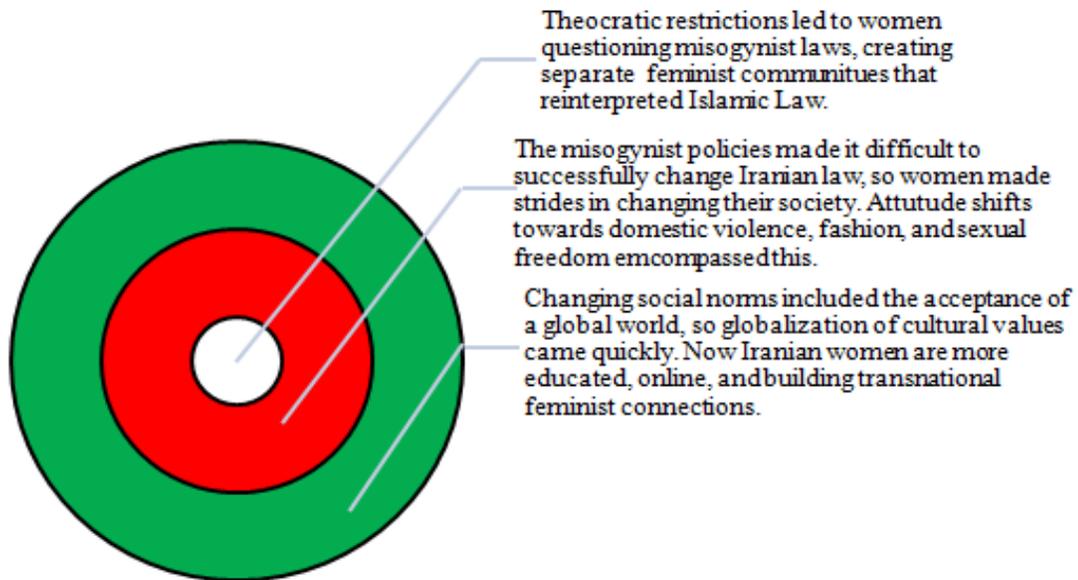


Figure 1: Relationship between variables

As illustrated in the chart, each variable led to the next variable, and thus became part of the overall movement that is Iranian feminism. It should also be noted that this model also fits the waves of American Feminism. As stated throughout the research, there are three main waves within American feminism: first wave, second wave, and third wave. Each wave is known for specific goals and accomplishments, and much like Iranian feminism, it has been a movement that increases in size with every wave. Ergo, if you replace the variables in the previous chart with the waves of American feminism, you will yield very similar results. However, it should not be assumed that the movements are completely identical. And yet, the two share many similarities—feminism, despite its regional origins, is undeniably a movement for everyone.²⁶⁵ Although the women’s movement in Iran is not a homogenous movement in the classical term, the activism of women—both Islamists and secularists—has increased dramatically in recent times.²⁶⁶ This was extremely apparent in the protests that broke-out after Iran’s 2009

presidential election. As stated before, the post-election protests began in June 2009, and are still considered a movement in 2011. It goes without saying that Iranian women have played a crucial role within these massive demonstrations for change.²⁶⁷

Women's movements are indeed very unique to their regions, but it can be noted that the overall goal—greater gender equality throughout law, society, and global culture—is the same. And as shown with this following diagram, no wave can move without the other; and no variable can function without the effects of the previous one:

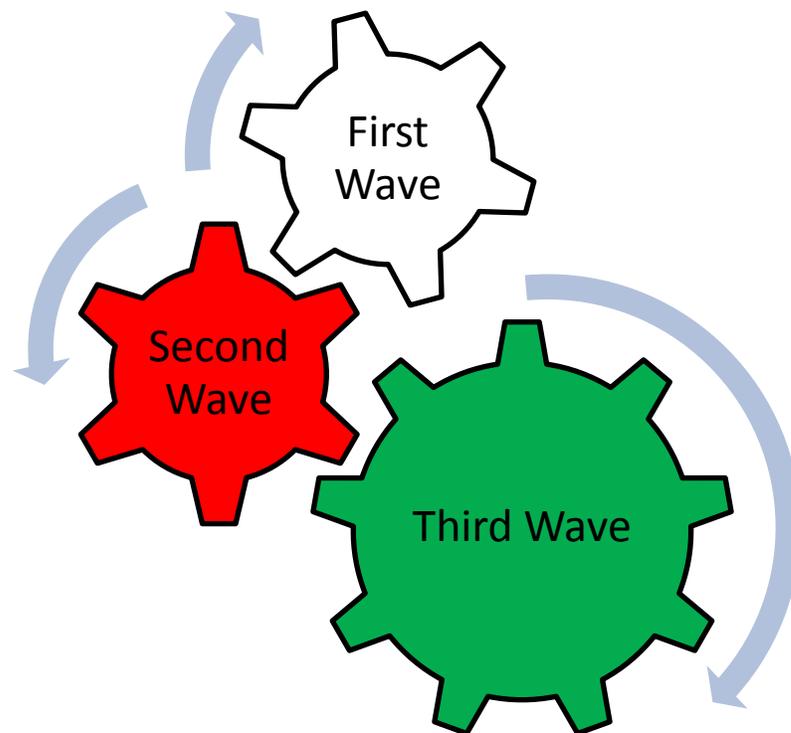


Figure 2: Relationship between waves of feminism.

With these illustrations kept in mind, it is obvious that comparative politics was used within this research. Indeed, providing American history as background to Iranian history,

politics, and society, gave an in depth analysis of how interconnected our world is. It allowed connections to be made along subjects that are typically perceived to lack any connection at all. Without a doubt, women in Iran have been greatly impacted by the actions of women in the United States, and other parts of the globe.

I would finally like to bring attention to the three variables and their effects at the local, national and international level. As this table will showcase, each variable held an impact at multiple levels:

Level of Impact Variables	Local	National	International
Theocratic Restrictions	Individuals questioned misogynist policies.	Feminist communities throughout the country were created—Islamic feminist and secular feminists.	New interpretations of Islamic law were created, and were influenced by international figures, including Shirin Ebadi.
Changing Social Norms	Communities struggle with the issue of domestic violence.	Fashion becomes a nation-wide form of political expression.	As global population increases, IRI initiates birth control policies, leading to a change in sexual mores.
Globalization (of cultural values)	Communities value knowledge, so education becomes more available to girls and women.	Internet becomes available throughout the country, allowing women to connect and exchange ideas.	Internet connection allows for transnational feminist communities, global unity is formed.

Table 1: Relationship between variables and three levels of impact.

It is an evident that the variables have had a profound impact on feminist thoughts at the local, national, and international level. Without a doubt, the democratic movements that we are seeing now in other parts of the Middle East have been influenced in some way by those actions of Iranian women.

Significance of Research

As stated in the first chapter of this study, this research holds importance on multiple levels. To begin with, Iran's natural resources, strategic location, and role as power-balancer in the Middle East make it a critical state in the realm of international relations.²⁶⁸ This makes the role of Iranian feminists extremely vital to the globalized world. For sure it can be said that feminism is a sensitive topic when it comes to policy making in and outside of Iran. The Pahlavi monarchy, in an effort to modernize, invested and took risks on Iran's women. The current Islamic regime took the polar opposite approach—rather than give women control over their own lives, the government obtained control; and attempts to resist any legal changes to the position of women by claiming them to be “un-Islamic.”²⁶⁹

Despite the Islamic Republic's efforts to gag women's issues, the voices of Iranian feminism are growing. I am compelled to believe that if the IRI had established gender equality laws from its inception, feminism would not have had evolved into such a threatening force. For sure, post-feminism would have gained momentum in Iran, and feminists would have lacked large scale support (as we are seeing in the United States today). However, this is not the route the IRI decided to take; I predict that Iranian women will continue to be influence by feminist thought, and through the support of transnational feminist networks, the change they desire will be even more inevitable.

Ergo, at an international level, the United States cannot ignore the voices of Iranian women. However, a subtle method of inspiring and motivating these women must be found. Taking a strong stance against the Islamic Republic Iran could in fact hurt the women's

movement in Iran, rather than help it. My hope is that this research will help policy makers find the perfect method of approaching Iranian women. It must be one that provides support, while still being mindful of the current Iranian government. It is a difficult line to draw, but research makes that line much clearer.

Areas for Future Study

Of course, the key to good research is that it opens the doors to future research. And so with that said, there are still many areas within this subject that needs to be explored. To begin with, what role do men play in Iran's women's movement? Men within Iran, though not as restricted as women, do have limitations in regards to societal freedom. As stated in a previous chapter, the majority of Iran's population is under the age of thirty—this statistic includes both men and women. Thus, the plight of these young men and their contribution to gender equality is a subject that requires more research.

Another area that requires more research is one that was already touched on briefly—how will feminist thoughts in Iran affect other parts of the Middle East? As we are witnessing in recent news, pro-Democratic movements are sweeping throughout the Middle East. Did the voices of Iranian women help ferment these protests? Did Iran's Green Movement serve as a catalyst to these movements?

Furthermore, the role of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) communities should be more closely examined within Iran. This is a community that is often ignored within Iranian society—and yet it is also a community that third wave feminism brings

much attention to. Examining LGBT issues in Iran and the ways in which feminism have impacted it would make an excellent case study.

These are all possible research questions in need of answers. For sure, there are many secondary resources that can be utilized to explore these subjects—what the topic is in need of is more primary sources. Though this is difficult for many individuals it is important, if not necessary, if we are to truly understand the implications of feminist thoughts within Iran.

To Conclude

Overall, this research has divulged into the components, history, and impact of feminist thought within Iran. Based on the data, the conclusions drawn, and the connections made, we can verify that feminist thoughts in Iran are increasing. Indeed, we have seen in the past gender inequality become a rallying point for Iran's women, and with the research presented in this thesis, I feel that Iranian's women—without a doubt—are a political threat to the current Islamic Republic of Iran. Much like feminism in the United States, feminism in Iran is a movement that cannot be ignored. These women are young, educated, tech-savvy, and understand that the personal is political. Change is inevitable-- and with the impact of feminism, I am sure that change will be a positive one.

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