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ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN IRAN
Feminism in a New Islamic Context

Fereshteh Ahmadi

Ahmadi reveals in this article how, by emphasizing the historical context of the holy texts, challenging the clergy's monolithic interpretational power, and reformulating Islamic concepts and law from a "feminist" perspective, Islamic feminists in Iran are rethinking gender in Islam. Not only are Islamic feminists opening the doors of interpretation of sacred texts and debates on women's issues to groups other than Muslims but they have also broken with the reactive gender conservatism and West phobia prevailing among fundamentalists, connected themselves with Western feminism, and woven new connections between Muslim women and Western feminism.

Afsaneh Najmabadi has called the past quarter century "years of hardship, years of growth."¹ Iranian women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, whether religiously observant or secular, rich or poor, or with little or extensive education have "spared no effort to win back, inch by inch, the grounds which they lost through 're-islamization' policies in Iran."² Many have gone even further in their demands for recognition as full citizens. What is interesting in this regard is not only the courage of thousands of women who put their careers, their families, and their lives in danger fighting for their human rights but also that this struggle, seemingly, has led to the development of a new discourse on feminism and Islam.

¹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: Years of Hardship, Years of Growth," in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

² Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 11.

Secular women in and outside the country have fought to obtain Iranian women's social and political rights as well as to draw the world's attention to women's situation in Iran. Their struggle has enormously contributed to the contest against the clergy's everyday attempts to marginalize women from social life, impose the veil as a barrier separating women physically from men, and deprive women of their rights as citizens, mothers, and wives. The secular women's struggle, although important, has unfortunately been neither adequate nor widespread enough to change the strong religious structure of social and political life of today's Iran. One reason for this failure is the barrier blocking secular women's work within the framework of an Islamic republic where fundamentalists hold absolute power over certain state institutions. An "inside force," a "from within" perspective, has been needed to alter the dominant fundamentalist discourse. Iranian Muslim women, particularly elite women, have answered this exigency.

Muslim women in Iran have tried to reconstruct gender and Islamic discourses. In many cases, they have challenged the clergy's monolithic power, starting a new trend in Islamic feminism in Iran that differs from other Muslim women's endeavors to reinterpret traditional Islamic theological and legal sources.³

However, politicians, journalists, novelists, and even filmmakers have focused on the situation of women in Muslim countries. Western feminist have not paid enough attention to Iranian women's grassroots intellectual and practical struggles to reconstruct gendered Islamic discourses. This is due in part to new waves of Islamophobia, which began with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in political power after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and reached its climax after September 11, 2001 (9/11). As a result, the West is trying to push a new colonial policy to demonize Muslims and Arabs for what it regards as the most important issue of their difference with the West: Islamic gender politics and practices. As Haideh Moghissi explains:

Once more the maltreatment of women and their exotic attire became the focal presentational discourses on the Middle East, providing compelling evidence for the moral, cultural and political deficiencies of the Islamic World. Self-congratulatory discussions from a Western hegemonic position about women's rights "here" as opposed to their deprivation "there" worked to fuel everyday racism, somehow softening the shame of the West as a violent, clumsy bully.⁴

³ Fereshteh Ahmadi, *Islamisk feminism och västerländska idéer i Iran* (Islamic feminism in Iran and West-oriented ideas), *Kvinnor och Fundamentalism* (Women and Fundamentalism) 6 (1999): 5–13; Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic"; Haleh Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case Study* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998); and John L. Esposito, "Introduction," in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*.

⁴ Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, 37.

In addition, another tendency has developed among Middle Eastern feminist academics who, for nearly two decades, have attempted to redirect the studies of women toward a more informed understanding of the complexity of women in Islamic societies.

My aim in this article is to discuss Islamic feminism in Iran. I especially note the development of a new brand of feminism in the Middle East. At the same time, we should not yet forget the danger Moghissi pointed out; we must avoid giving an imaginary picture of Islamic feminism as the “only culturally legitimate frame of reference within which to campaign for women’s rights” in the Middle East and “overlooking the role of Islamic legal institutions and practices in maintaining, through the ages, the specific patriarchal order which circumscribes women’s lives in Muslim countries.”⁵

Islamic Feminism

A new generation of feminists has emerged during the past two decades, as women’s issues became an integral part of the modern Islamic discourses. Everywhere in Muslim countries, Muslim and secular feminists, as well as those in political power, look for Islamic solutions for a very modern problem that is the result of the changed status of women. Women are increasingly calling for equality and participating in the politics of the Muslim world. Women are also working on religious and cultural levels to change women’s situation in Islamic societies. A question that many scholars have debated is whether such solutions can be called “feminist” in the sense of representing women’s perspectives. In other words, is it possible to talk about an Islamic feminism?

Regarding the use of the term “Islamic feminism” I am in accordance with Moghissi, who stresses that, “today, feminism has grown large and includes many brands, both conservative and radical, religious and atheist, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, white and non-white, issue-oriented and holistic, individualistic and community-oriented; and feminists hail from the North and the South. So the question, whether we can affirm a new brand of feminism which is self-identified or identified by others as ‘Islamic feminism’ is rather superfluous.”⁶ In my discussion, I proceed from Margot Badran’s definition of Islamic feminism as “a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm.”⁷ I therefore include here both those Muslim women activists who identify themselves as Islamic feminists and those who do not, and also those

⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁷ Margot Badran, “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 569 (January 17–23, 2002): 2, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm>.

women who are in power and those who are not. Islamic feminism, as Badran mentions, is

a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West. . . . Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating increasing frequency in cyberspace.⁸

The basic methodologies of Islamic feminism are “the classic Islamic methodologies of *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur’an). Additionally, Islamic feminists use “methods and tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc.”⁹ In doing this, they proceed also from their own experiences and questions as women. They stress, as Badran explains, “that classical, and also much of post-classical, interpretation was based on men’s experiences, male-centered questions, and the overall patriarchal societies in which they lived.”¹⁰ The new generation of Islamic feminists, especially in Iran, is thus using important post-modern concepts.

Footprints in a New Direction: Rethinking Gendered Islam in Iran

All evidence shows that a feminist approach to gender in Islamic law and sacred texts is possible. As it stands, such an approach became even inevitable when Islam no longer was part of the oppositional discourse, but in power. This is so because when the custodians of the Shari’a became the basis of the legalistic system of an Islamic state, they had to deal with contradictory aims: on the one hand, upholding the family and restoring women to their “true and high” status in Islam, and, on the other hand, upholding men’s Shari’a prerogatives. This becomes still more problematic when the Islamic state dealt with so-called modern problems and identified itself as modern, as we see in Iran. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini has mentioned, the doors opened for new interpretations of the Qur’an and other sacred texts on a scale that is unique in the history of Islamic law.¹¹ Twenty-five years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, we are now witnessing the flourishing of feminist rereading of the sacred texts, a shift some

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari’a in Post-Khomeini Iran,” in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. M. Yamani (London: Garnet, 1996).

scholars declare to be so radical that it has no counterpart in the rest of the Muslim world.¹²

It is true that women in Iran are far from legal equals of men. It is also true that despite many years of hard work by a remarkably active group of women, inside and outside the Iranian parliament, many discriminatory laws remain in full practice. Yet the past decade has also witnessed an incredible flourishing of women's intellectual and cultural productions in Iran. "Almost two decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, against the deepest fears of many of the secular feminist activities of the revolution, not only have women not disappeared from public life, but they have an unmistakably active presence in practically every field of artistic creation, professional achievement, educational and industrial institutions, and even in sports activities."¹³ Actually, for Iranian women, a deep existential sense of proving themselves against all odds has become the creative energy of their productions. Out of many years of Islamic women's activism emerged the drive toward rethinking gender in Iran in more radical ways. The growing number of women's organizations and institutes, as well as a variety of women's journals now being published in Iran, attests to the significance of this rethinking. Some of these journals, such as *Zanan*, explicitly define themselves as feminist oriented and are embarking on a project of thorough and radical interpretations of Islamic sources about women's rights.¹⁴

The point is that the method of reformist interpretations on women's issues has been to use more woman-friendly sources from an already existing set of authoritative exegetical texts. Therefore, the Islamic feminists in Iran engage in direct interpretations in their own right. Mehrangiz Kar formulated this engagement by declaring, "It is time for *ijtihad*."¹⁵

An innovative thinking of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources concerning women's issues is not an Iranian Islamic feminist invention. Yet, there is evidence that Iranian feminism represents a new direction in rethinking gender in Islam in more radical ways, such as through reinterpretation. As John Esposito points out, "the early years of Islamic women's activism [in Iran] generated the drive to rethink gender in Islam in new and sometimes radical ways. Iran offers a good case study of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) not simply of traditional Islamic

¹² Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic"; Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits"; and John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹³ Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic," 59.

¹⁴ *Zanan* is the most important journal in Iran that articulates the Islamic feminists' ideas. During the past years, *Zanan* has become one of most significant documents for studying Islamic feminism. See, for example, Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits"; and Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic."

¹⁵ Mehrangiz Kar, "Jaygahe zan dar gavanine kyifari dar Iran" (The position of women in criminal law in Iran), *Zanan* 11 (1993): 16. Mehrangiz Kar is a prominent women's rights lawyer in Iran who cooperated with *Zanan*.

theological and legal sources, but rather an effort that went directly to interpreting sacred texts.”¹⁶ Thus in Iran, male reformists first argued for reinterpretation of the Qur’an and other sacred texts regarding gender issues, but now women are claiming their right to interpret Islamic sources and to leave behind or go beyond classical formulations to develop new paradigms and reformulate Islamic concepts and law from a “feminist” perspective. The result is lively debate over competing visions of male-female relations and the status and roles of women in Islam and Muslim societies, yielding new understanding of spiritual, professional, and social equality.

A striking point is that some Iranian Islamist feminists agree that there are verses in the Qur’an that are inappropriate to employ in the modern era. In their critique of the Qur’an, they have applied Abdol Karim Soroush’s approach to Islam and sacred texts,¹⁷ as Mir-Hosseini explains,

Zanan’s Shari’a discourse is not isolated, but is part and parcel of a new tendency within the centre of the religio-political establishment. This tendency, which can perhaps be best termed “post-fundamentalist,” represents the latest faction in post-war and post-Khomeini Iran. It is changing the very terms of not only the Shari’a discourse on women but that of the Islamic Republic, by arguing for a kind of demarcation between state and religion. . . . Ironically, its most outspoken advocates were part of the early political leadership which defined the Republic’s policy. This tendency has its intellectual core in Tehran, gathered around Dr. Abdul Karim Soroush, the guiding inspiration of the Kiyān Cultural Institute, which publishes a monthly Kiyān—*Zanan’s* brother paper—in which these views are aired. This tendency advocates a brand of feminism which takes Islam, not the West, as its source of legitimacy. What is significant about this “feminism,” and especially its line of argument, is that it is grounded in a Shi’i discourse which is radically different from the official one.¹⁸

Dubbed the Martin Luther of Shiite Islam for his reformist ideas, Soroush, who in the early days of the Islamic Republic was one of the most prolific and eloquent intellectuals of the Islamic Revolution and a member of the Council for Cultural Revolution, is now regarded as one of the most rebellious and learned critics of clerical rule in Iran.¹⁹ Although far from being regarded as an exponent

¹⁶ Esposito, “Introduction,” xix.

¹⁷ This name is written differently. I use Soroush as it is written on his home page, but when it regards the citation, quoting an author who has used another spelling, I keep it as it is written by the author.

¹⁸ Mir-Hosseini, “Stretching the Limits,” 315–16.

¹⁹ American journalist Robin Wright and others after him have referred to Soroush as the “Luther of Islam,” a designation that indicates, above all, the level of attention that Soroush’s thought has deservedly found in the West. Robin Wright, “Iran’s New Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (2000): 139.

of gender equality, Soroush is without doubt one of the most influential figures among Islamic feminists.²⁰ His radical discussion on what is essential in Islam and what is accidental has had great impact on some Muslim women, such as those in *Zanan*.

Soroush's main thesis has been that there are essentials (*zati*) in Islam that cannot be changed. Essentials of Islam are elements without which Islam is not Islam. There are yet others, which he calls "accidentals" (*arazi*), that are the results of the special time and place when Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, was born and socialized.²¹ In a 1996 interview with British Muslim weekly *Q-News International*, he asserted that "all history is contingent, including the history of Islam. My criterion for separating the essentials and accidentals of religion is the knowledge that things could have been otherwise. Things that could have happened otherwise are accidentals. For example, *tawheed* (oneness of God) is an essential because it could not have been otherwise."²² According to Soroush, it was an accidental of history that the prophet was born in Arabia and therefore the language of Islam is Arabic, something that according to Soroush significantly shaped the conceptual framework of the Qur'an.²³

Proceeding from a hermeneutical perspective, Soroush advocated the doctrine of the "expansion of Prophetic experience," stressing that "the prophet is a human being and his experience is human, so are his disciples."²⁴ His point is that since Mohammed was Arab, his way of thinking, and especially his usage of words and statements in passing the words of God to people, was confined to Arabic culture and language. So, if Mohammed had been born, for instance, in Greece or Iran, his way of thinking and language would not be influenced by Arabic culture but Greek or Persian culture. Accordingly, if Mohammed was not born in Arabia, Qur'anic rules on social issues might be different and the Qur'an would hence be a different book, at least when it concerns the parts that

²⁰ Mir-Hosseini devoted a chapter in her book *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), to discuss Soroush's view of gender.

²¹ On the basis of Soroush's doctrine on accidentals of history, some other thinkers, such as Alireza Alavitabar, extended the realm of accidentals so vastly that it contains a large part of the Qur'an. According to Alavitabar, "The accidentals of Islam are the Arabic language and culture, scientific theories discussed in the Qur'an and Traditions, historical events recounted in the Qur'an and the Traditions, and posed questions and answers that have been recorded in the Qur'an and the Traditions" ("New Religious Thought and Feminism," *Aftab* magazine [in Persian, 2003], published in English in the Iranian feminist newsletter *Bad Jens*, September 2004, <http://www.badjens.com/alireza.html>).

²² Faisal Bodi's interview with Soroush under the title "A conversation with Abdolkarim Soroush," *Q-News International* (British Muslim weekly), no. 220–21 (June 14–27, 1996), <http://www.seraj.org/qnews.htm>.

²³ Abdol Karim Soroush, *Bast-i tajrubih-i nabavi* (Expansion of Prophetic experience) (Tehran: Sirat, 1999).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

are not essentials but accidentals. In this light, Soroush considers the existing text of the Qur'an as the product of a certain time. By going through several verses, Soroush has shown us how some subjects of the Qur'an would be totally different if the language of the Qur'an was not Arabic.²⁵ In this regard, he writes (in Farsi):

If the Prophet had lived longer, and more incidents had befallen him . . . the Qur'an could be much more than this. . . . If the accusation of adultery had not been levied on Ayesheh, would the first verses of the chapter Light (24:1–19) have been revealed? If the war of confederate tribes had not taken place would the chapter on it (33) be revealed? If there was no Abu-Lahb, would the chapter Abu-Lahab (111) have arrived? These are all unimportant historic events whose occurrence or non-occurrence would be the same. There is a record of them in the Qur'an only because these events took place.²⁶

Addressing Soroush's doctrine on accidentals of history, Said Amir Arjomand points out, "on this premise, not only the entire corpus of the sacred law, but also the very expression of the Islamic revelation in the Arabic language and the culture that grew around it, could consistently be established as historically 'contingent' rather than 'essential' features of religion." According to Arjomand, Soroush's doctrine on accidentals of history "offers a radical critique of contemporary Islamic thought for mistaking the historically contingent forms of Islamic religion for its revealed essence; and for disregarding religious pluralism as the inevitable result of the reading of revealed texts in specific human languages and socio-historical contexts."²⁷

Soroush stresses that those who interpret the Qur'an and other religious texts outside their historic context and through only their own understanding of faith as "the Truth" ultimately become religious despots who support the idea that the Shari'a is unchangeable.²⁸ According to Soroush, "rather than being a manifesto, the Shari'a is silent, it is given voice by its exponents. The Shari'a does not put forward immutable answers to predicaments of each historical moment."²⁹ Seen in this light, Behrooz Chamari-Tabrizi stresses that Soroush transformed Shari'a "from a preconceived dogma into a perpetually rearticu-

²⁵ Abdol Karim Soroush, "Zati v Arazi dar Din" (Essential and accidental in religion), *Kiyan* 8, no. 42 (1989): 4–19.

²⁶ Soroush, *Bast-i tajrubih-i nabavi*, 21.

²⁷ Said Amir Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran," *Middle East Study* 34 (2002): 719–31, quotations on 723, 724.

²⁸ Abdol Karim Soroush, *Siyasat-nameh* (Political letters) (Tehran: Sirat, 2000), 220.

²⁹ Abdol Karim Soroush, *The Theoretical Construction and Expansion of the Shari'ah* (Tehran: Sirat, 1995), 34.

lated and contested text.”³⁰ Soroush argues³¹ that any claim to the absolute truth of Islam transforms it from a religion to an ideology.³² Soroush accepts the doctrine of “social pluralism” and affirms that “a pluralistic society is a non-ideological society—that is, [a society] without an official interpretation and [official] interpreters—and founded on pluralist reason.”³³ Likewise, he characterizes the view of the ruling clerical elite as “the fascist reading of religion” and presents them as the “bearers of religious despotism.”³⁴

The immediate result of Soroush’s arguments on “accidentals of history” and “expansion of Prophetic experience” is that Soroush classifies many laws considered fundamental in Islam as accidental instead. Examples of such are the law allowing Muslim men to marry four women and laws that give automatic rights of divorce and custody of children to men. In a June 1996 interview published in *The Guardian*, Soroush, referring to the concept of interpretive reasoning in Islam, stressed that rules on women’s issues “are accidentals, which can be subjects of discussion [*ijtihad*].”³⁵ In different interviews, Soroush has shown that he is not a radical fighter for women’s human rights, yet his thesis on “expansion of Prophetic experience,” his formulation of “accidentals of history,” and his affirmation of “social pluralism” have been essential for Islamic feminists.

Mir-Hosseini maintains that Islamist women such as those portrayed and writing in *Zanan* have applied Soroush’s approach to Islam and to the sacred texts.³⁶ This has made it possible for them to mesh their faith with their feminist tendencies and to cast their feminist-oriented demands within an Islamic framework. Mir-Hosseini, who has thoroughly studied *Zanan* and also attended many of Soroush’s lectures, stresses that,

I could not understand how and why Soroush’s ideas had inspired women in *Zanan*, who like me objected to his gender position. Only later, when I was well into writing this book, did I understand that I must shift my focus. It was not his position on gender but his conception of Islam and his approach to sacred texts that empowered women in *Zanan* to argue for gender equality. . . . The opportunity to hear Soroush in person helped me place his 1992 talks on women in the context of his wider analytical method and his alter thinking. By now I could see how

³⁰ Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, “Contentious Public Religion: Two Conceptions of Islam in Revolutionary Iran,” *International Sociology* 19, no. 4 (2004): 504–23, quotation on 515.

³¹ Abdol Karim Soroush, *Religious Faith, Religious Justification* (Tehran: Yad-Avarn Publishers, 1992).

³² Ghamari-Tabrizi, “Contentious Public Religion,” 516.

³³ Abdol Karim Soroush, *Siratha-yi mustaqim* (Straight paths) (Tehran, 1998), 1:49.

³⁴ Soroush, *Siyasat-nameh*, 215, 220.

³⁵ Quoted in Kathy Evan, “A Questioning Approach to Islam Puts Maverick Professor in Limelight,” *The Guardian*, June 6, 1996.

³⁶ Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, 217–37.

his approach to Islam could open up space for a radical rethinking of gender relations, among other issues.³⁷

Soroush's thesis on "expansion of Prophetic experience" paved the way for some Islamic feminists to argue that those verses of the Qur'an that clerics use to undermine women's rights and reflect some limited experiences of Mohammed's personal life were only valuable for a limited historical period and therefore are not applicable for our modern time. For instance, Shahla Skerkat, editor of *Zanan*, demands that religious thinking should be reformed in the interests of a feminist reading of Islam. "Given the problems which women face, a radical change in the law is needed," she says. "Since several articles of the Civil Code are based on the Shari'a, then the Shari'a needs to be reinterpreted and women should be involved in the process."³⁸ For doing this, Skerkat regards Soroush's thesis on "accidentals of history" an appropriate analytical instrument. Citing Soroush, she stresses that "some of religious intellectuals have done an enormous amount of work on the subject and opened the way to an evolution of religious thought. Their success is sure to affect the position of women. We believe that our understanding of religion varies with each stage of history and religious interpretation should take this into account."³⁹

Employing a historical approach when interpreting the Qur'an and other religious texts—which Skerkat stresses above—makes it possible to criticize verses hostile toward women in the Qur'an as being accidental, as being written in a certain place (Arabia) and time (more than thirteen centuries ago, during the life of Mohammed) and therefore inapplicable today.

Another voice who demands a change of view to the Qur'an belongs to Azam Taleqani, daughter of well-known Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani. Azam Taleqani is a former member of the Islamic Republic's Parliament (Majlis), director of the Islam women's institute, and editor of the critical journal *Payam-e hajar* (Hajar's message). Azam Taleqani lectures on a new exegesis of the Qur'an. Katajan Amirpur, an Iranian scholar in Germany, who has attended Taleqani's lectures, suggests that Taleqani teaches the Qur'an and *tafsir* because she feels "it is important that women know for themselves what is written in the [Qur'an]" so that "men cannot pretend that x is y." According to her, men always interpret the Qur'an to their own benefit.⁴⁰ In her lectures, Taleqani stresses that the social context in which Qur'anic laws came into being has completely changed, and thus a new interpretation of the Qur'an is necessary.

³⁷ Ibid., 238.

³⁸ Cited in Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud, "Islamist and Secular Women Unite: Iranian Women Take on the Mullahs," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (November 1996), <http://mondediplo.com/1996/11>.

³⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ Katajan Amirpur, "Islamic Feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran," February 25, 2003, http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-307/_nr-9/_p-1/i.html?PHPSESSID=5869.

Iranian Islamic feminists' critical approach to the Qur'an, which demands the application of a historical approach, plays an important role for a radical change of Islamic discourse on women's issues. The importance of this view is highlighted especially when we remember that Muslims believe that the Qur'an—as expressed in six thousand verses to the Prophet Mohammed, who repeated them to literate people, who then wrote them down—is the word of God and therefore the undisputed source of law in Islam. Over the centuries, those who have criticized the Qur'an have been regarded as *kafar* (infidels) and condemned to death. Now, under the reign of an Islamic state, Islamist feminists have begun to question the indisputability of laws concerning women that are based directly on Qur'anic verses. This will hopefully change Islamic discourse and create a new landscape of women's rights in Islamic societies.

Based on Soroush's idea of social pluralism, Islamic feminists have emphasized a radical expansion of the domain of interpretation of the Qur'an. This emphasis reflects a new awareness of the need for greater inclusiveness of different religious and secular groups. Here, it should be mentioned that in Shi'i Islam it is only certain scholar clerics who have the right to interpret the Qur'an and other sacred texts. Sa'idzadah, one of the writers in *Zanan*, defends the right of reinterpretation of sacred texts not only for every Muslim but also for non-Muslims:

Reason cannot be divided according to that of a jurispudent and non-jurispudent, especially if we believe in *ijtihad* as an obligation of any responsible adult. . . . Moreover, in the life histories of men of wisdom . . . , we do not see any discrimination between believer and nonbeliever. . . . If a person, following the existing methodologies of jurisprudence, arrives at correct conclusions, even if s/he were not a Muslim, her/his opinion is acceptable.⁴¹

Iranian Islamic feminists go so far in their demand that they argue not only that Shari'a needs to be reinterpreted on the basis of a feminist approach and new laws deduced according to contemporary needs but also that such revisions should be carried out in light of contemporary schools of philosophy and thought.⁴² What makes this openness possible is their claim to being part of a wider movement, feminism. I see this as another step toward rethinking gendered Islam in Iran.

⁴¹ Sayed Mohsen Sa'idzadah, "Va amma pasukh-i ma" (But our answer), *Zanan* 2, no. 14 (1993): 52–53.

⁴² Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits"; and Said Reza Ameli, "Feminist Expectations and the Response of Muslim Women: The International Conference on Woman in Islam, London," September 9, 2001, www.inminds.co.uk/paper-feminism-muslim-respons.html.

Affiliation with Western Feminism and Expansion of the Debate on Women's Issues with Non-Muslims

Women who try to defend their rights in Muslim contexts often are accused of importing a foreign ideology whenever they ask for social justice. Thus, many Islamic feminists first try to demonstrate that they are truly and genuinely rooted in their culture, expending considerable energy to distinguish themselves from "Western feminists," as, for instance, "Third World feminists." This is understandable if we take into consideration nationalist and anticolonialist struggles in the history of the Arab world. To the contrary, Iranian Islamic feminism has openly, for instance in *Zanan*, claimed its affiliation with Western feminism.⁴³ *Zanan* translates articles from Western feminist journals and presents readers with divergent theories from different feminist schools, for example, works of such Western feminist scholars as Simone de Beauvoir, Nadine Gordimer, Mary Wollstonecraft, Nancy Friday, Deborah Tannen, Virginia Woolf, and Susan Faludi.⁴⁴ By focusing on the similarities of the women's movement in the religious settings of different countries, journals such as *Zanan* have helped overcome long-term hatred toward Western feminism in Muslim countries.⁴⁵ Breaking with reactionary gender conservatism and West phobia, these journals have embarked on connecting themselves with Western feminism and weaving new connections between Muslim women and Western feminism.

For instance, the July 2004 issue of *Zanan* reflects Elahe Rostami's idea that feminism is a global movement struggling for women's rights. She admits the legitimacy and necessity of different feminist schools and the importance of these schools for the Iranian women's movement. She stresses that Iranian feminists should apply the theories and praxis of feminist schools around the world to their own analyses of gender issues and their struggle against gender inequality in Iran. She affirms that although women's problems are the result of the patriarchal system, which is a global problem, women in the Third World also have their own issues, and they ask for collaboration among feminist activists around the world.

⁴³ Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic," 72; and Badran, "Islamic Feminism," 2.

⁴⁴ Mahrokh Dabiri, "Nagdi bar jense dovom" (A critic on second sex), *Zanan* 1 (1991): 31–33; Zohre Zahedi, "Raze *Zananegi*" (The mystery of womanhood), *Zanan* 2 (1991): 14, 20; Fateme Ahsani, "Modar bya eteraf konim" (Mother, come to confess), *Zanan* 6 (1992): 2–6; Zohre Zahedi, "Deborah Tannen," *Zanan* 10 (1993): 4; Ali Khazaifari, "Fereshteh-e khaneh" (The angel of the house), *Zanan* 11 (1993): 41–51; and Zohre Zahedi, "Ahar *Zanan* ba mardan barabrand pas char!!?" (If women are equal with men, so why!!!?), *Zanan* 11 (1993): 18–29.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Nazanin Sharokhi, "Feminism baraye *Zanan* noskhe nemipichad" (Feminism does not give any prescription to women), first article of the series of articles "Questions about feminism" *Zanan* (March 2004); Nazanin Sharokhi, "Negahi dagigtar be khanehaye Aram" (A careful look at the quiet houses) "Questions about feminism" series, *Zanan* (May 2004); Elahe Rostami, "Dastavardhay-e jonbesh-e zanan-e iran" (The outcomes of the Iranian women's movement), *Zanan* (July 2004).

In the Islamic world, an important historical trend has structured categories of the West and the East; modernism and Islam; and feminism and cultural authenticity as necessarily exclusive, forcing Muslim women to choose between claims to a cultural self and a feminist self. However, the new trend emerging among Islamic feminists in Iran is a radical break from this pattern. Iranian Islamic feminists now use theories and methodologies of both Islamic and secular schools. Well-known scholar of gender and Islam Margot Badran has noted that “Islamic feminist discourse in Iran draws upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims.”⁴⁶ Iranian Islamic feminists have opened up the domain of interpretation to nonbelievers and non-Muslims, insisted on equality of women and men in all domains, and disconnected “natural/created differences” between women and men from cultural and social constructions of womanhood and manhood. In doing this, as Najmabadi points out, the Islamic feminist journals in Iran have opened up a new space for dialogue between Islamic women activists and reformers and secular feminism, which begins to reverse a sixty-year-old rift during which they treated each other with mutual antagonism and constructed the two categories as mutually exclusive.⁴⁷ By publishing articles written by secular feminists, *Zanan* has made possible dialogue among religious and secular voices on women’s issues.⁴⁸ The aim is to build a united front against the oppression of women in Iran.

The solidarity emerging between Islamist and secular women, which goes beyond their divergences, can open the prospect of new forms of cooperation. Editor of *Zanan*, Shahla Sherkat notes, “we must all tolerate and respect each other’s convictions. Even if we don’t share the same philosophy, the same beliefs and thinking, we can and should work together.”⁴⁹

Zahra Ommi, one of the editors of another well-known women’s magazine, *Farzaneh*, also points out:

We know that secular women do not share our convictions but this does not give us any problems, since we’re all working to promote the status of women. We Islamists have abandoned the idea that we are sole heirs to the revolution. We realise that our sectarianism during the early years led to the isolation of many competent women and this was detrimental to women in general. We want to make up for our mistakes.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Badran, “Islamic Feminism,” 4.

⁴⁷ Najmabadi, “Feminism in an Islamic Republic.” For more about the alliance between secular and Islamist women, see, for instance, Kian-Thiébaud, “Islamist and Secular Women Unite”; and Mir-Hosseini, “Stretching the Limits,” 285–319.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Khazaifan, “Fereshteh-e khaneh”; or Roza Eftekhari, “Chahar mabhasa asasi dar feminism” (Four essential discussions in feminism), *Zanan* 32 (1996): 30–34; or Rostami, “Dastavardhay-e jonbesh-e zanan-e iran.”

⁴⁹ Cited in Kian-Thiébaud, “Islamist and Secular Women Unite,” 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

A good example of the secular and Islamic feminists' cooperation concerns the right of women to work as lawyers and a joint protest campaign in 1999 against the ban on women judges.⁵¹ Another example is the participation of several secular women activists in the divergent roundtable discussions that Islamic feminists have held.⁵²

Islamic feminism in Iran has extended the domain of feminist dialog in the country not only with secular women but also with clerical scholars (*ulema*). As a result of Islamic feminists' all-embracing presence in the political and social life and their great impact on the women's fight for their rights, for the first time, Shi'i clerics in the Qhom, the center of religious and political power of Shi'i clerics, were "obliged" to open their doors to a Muslim feminist woman with a University of Cambridge doctorate in anthropology (Ziba Mir-Hosseini), who engaged in a challenging face-to-face debate on gender issues with several prominent Islamic *ulema*. Most of the interviewed clerics were those who had or still have strong connections with governmental positions in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Interestingly, Mir-Hosseini did her research by collaborating with a Muslim feminist male cleric, Hojjat ol-islam Syyed Mohsen Saidzadeh. This research resulted in *Islam and Gender*, published in 1999 by Princeton University Press.

In her review, Nayereh Tohidi stresses that this "original and unique" book by itself may indicate that Islamic discourse on gender is "on the threshold of a major shift." "What is clearly evident in these fascinating debates," she argues,

is that a growing number of Islamists, in general, and the Shi'i clerics who have seized state power, dictating and controlling women's rights and options in Iran, in particular, are feeling compelled to come up with more pragmatic responses to the new realities of the modern times. They are strongly pressured by the rising literacy rates and educational levels among women as well as men; increasing social and political presence of modern women; feminist critics (from both secular and Islamic perspectives) of patriarchal traditions, despotism and violence; and growing demands for democracy, equal civil and human rights.⁵³

The popularity of *Zanan* and the emergence of different feminist journals (secular as well as Islamic) have compelled even the theological school in the Qhom to publish a journal for women entitled *Payam-e Zan* (Woman's messenger). This has opened possibilities for Islamic feminists to dialogue with clerics

⁵¹ Amirpur, "Islamic Feminism."

⁵² In 1997, *Zanan* organized and reported on one such discussion, entitled "What Are the Most Important Problems of Women in Iran?" Featuring feminists such as Farideh Farahi and Mehrangiz Kar, this discussion touched on issues such as the reform movement in Iran, the limited nature of women's rights, and the need for the press to enjoy more freedom.

⁵³ Nayereh Tohidi, "Islam and Gender," review of Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, *Farzaneh* 6, no. 11 (2003): 72.

concerning Islamic jurisprudence and interpretation of Qur'anic verses pertaining to women's issues.

Challenges of the increasingly globalized modern realities have not only caused problems for Shi'i clerics. These challenges, together with the many changes Iranian society has undergone in the past three decades, have forced many secular and religious Iranian women to rethink and redefine the relationship between Islam and feminism. Tohidi mentions that this has opened "a new phase in the politics of gender and the politics of feminist theorization in Muslim societies."⁵⁴ According to Mir-Hosseini, this political atmosphere has created "a space in which a critique of the fundamental gender assumptions in Islamic law can be sustained in ways that were impossible until recently."⁵⁵ The crucial aspect of this critique is that it points not only toward the different interpretations of the Qur'an but also toward the holy book itself, demanding a feminist reinterpretation of it.

The level of openness to influences from "the outside" described above, so to speak, contrasts with the usual hostility toward all that is branded foreign to Islam, an attitude obsessively cultivated by most ideologues in the government and Islamic leaders of the country.

Postmodern Ideas

Besides reformulating Islamic concepts and law from a feminist perspective, and opening the doors of interpretation of sacred texts and debates on women's issues to groups other than Muslims, another footprint that signifies the rethinking of gender in Islam among Islamic feminists in Iran is their inclination to adopt postmodern ideas in their discussions of women's issues. Although in the world of politics it is supposed that Islamist movements signify a trend that ushers in a return to the mediaeval Islamic period, according to scholars, Islamist movements are a modern phenomenon.⁵⁶ These movements hardly can be considered a reaction to modernity in general; rather, they are a consequence of the modern restructuring of Islamic societies, or, as Samuel Eisenstadt calls them, the "Jacobin dimension of modernity."⁵⁷ Concerning Islamic feminism it is still difficult to maintain that Islamic feminists' rearticulation of the Islamic texts has led to a reactionary trend toward a return to the medieval Islamic ideas. Instead, they indicate an integration of postmodern ideas.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁵ Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, 10.

⁵⁶ Said Amir Arjomand, "Islam, Political Change and Globalization," *Thesis Eleven* 76, no. 1 (2004): 9–28; Samuel N. Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalisms, Sectarianisms, and Revolution: The Jacobin Dimensions of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); John Obert Voll, *Islam, Continuity, and Change in the Modern World* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994); and Esposito, *Islamic Threat*.

⁵⁷ Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalisms, Sectarianisms, and Revolution*.

Iranian Islamic feminists employ in their analyses some of postmodernism's conceptual tools. They appreciate the spirit of tolerance, optimism, and the drive for self-knowledge in postmodernism and stress a postmodern feminist principle of diversity. Multiple truths, multiple roles, and multiple realities are part of postmodern feminists' focus. Iranian Islamic feminists favor postmodernists' rejection of an essential nature of women. That postmodern feminism offers a useful philosophy for diversity in feminism because of its acceptance of multiple truths and rejection of essentialism is just what Islamic feminism needs for legitimizing itself in the feminist discourse. Besides the postmodern acceptance of diversity, Iranian Islamic feminists also adhere to a postmodernist view of language as functioning as a mechanism of institutional control.

Feminists have long indicted the language of traditional Western monotheistic religions as being gender biased in favor of men. This has opened up the discussion that male theologians' gender-biased interpretation of God results in a masculinized representation of God, which has made the institutionalized oppression of women seem right and natural. One of the most important contributions of postmodern feminism to the ongoing feminist critique of the Bible and other religious texts is its fundamental challenge to the interpretative frame conventionally placed around the text. By recognizing the constraints disciplinary systems impose, postmodern feminists claim a valorization of the category of difference, which makes it possible to unseat or destabilize the reigning modes of interpretation. One essential point in postmodern feminist critique is that it focuses not only on the power hidden in relations of domination, which many face in everyday life, but also on the ideological forces that authorize and sustain these relations of domination.⁵⁸

In their reinterpretation of sacred texts, Islamic feminists in Iran have employed postmodern feminist critiques, especially their emphasis on language as being implicitly value laden. A striking example is their attempt to expand the domain of reinterpretation to a new linguistic construction of the Arabic language, as witnessed by heated debate about the word *rajol* (plural: *rejal*).⁵⁹ The issue concerns the right of women to be political leaders.

The Iranian Council of Guardians has several times rejected women's right to run for president. At issue is the interpretation of a constitutional clause requiring the president to be a *rajol*, an Arabic word for man; in setting out the conditions for presidential candidacy, Article 115 uses the term *rajol*, which applies to a man but may also refer to a recognized personality. The Guardians' council stipulated that the word *rajol* means "man," a significant interpretation

⁵⁸ Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire Building* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁵⁹ Arabic as the language of the sacred in fact became codified in syntax, grammar, and vocabulary through the writing of commentaries on the Qur'an in the first centuries of Islam.

given that under the constitution the president of the Islamic Republic must be a religious or political man.

In debating the council's decision against women's right to participate in political life, Islamic feminists use a postmodern discussion of language and power. Some Islamic women activists, such as Faezeh Rafsanjani, Azam Taleghani, and Fatemeh Alia, argue that in Iran the word *rajol* as used in the constitution means in the Persian language "mankind" and not "man" and thus does not exclude women. According to them, the council's interpretation of the word is its literal meaning, which is male gender. Those who devised the constitution (shortly after the Islamic Revolution in 1979) also discussed this issue and they were mostly concerned with the gender. However, according to the Iranian Islamic feminists, the disputed word, which comes from Arabic, could also be interpreted as meaning "personalities" in Persian, and this is the translation used in some English translations of the constitution.

In this regard, Fatemeh Alia, Tehran's deputy in parliament, emphasizes language as being value laden and has asserted that in Arabic literature the word *rajol* is gender neutral.⁶⁰ Thus, the Council of Guardians' rejection of women's ability to run for president is, according to her, a matter of interpretation of the word *rajol* and not Qur'anic law.

Another activist who challenges the interpretative frame of the word *rajol* is Faezeh Rafsanjani, president of the International Islamic Women's Sports organization and the Islamic Countries' Women Sports Solidarity Council and daughter of former president Hashemi Rafsanjani. Faezeh Rafsanjani emphasizes the ambiguity of the constitution in interpreting literally the word *rajol*. Stressing that the word *rajol* has been interpreted in different ways in divergent situations, Rafsanjani asks, "What's the difference between being president of the republic and running a government department? None. They're both executive jobs. So why can't a woman run the country when she can be head of a government department?"⁶¹

Azam Taleghani, who attempted to run in the 1997 presidential election, argued that the term *rejal* is applied to both men and women in the Qur'an. In an interview, she was asked, "How have you nominated yourself for presidency when in the Islamic constitutional law, it is not specified that women are qualified to be political leaders?" Taleghani responded by drawing heavily on her own interpretation of Islamic law as a woman:

How could we know and ensure what "rejal" (the qualified) means in the Islamic law? It is not specified that women are NOT eligible. Qur'an says: Unless one society, one group or one individual want and demand

⁶⁰ Farhad Pouladi, "Iranian Women Barred from Standing in Presidential Vote," *AFP* (Worldwide News Agency), October 24, 2004, 1, <http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=587>.

⁶¹ Cited in Kian-Thiébaud, "Islamist and Secular Women Unite," 1.

change themselves, no social change is possible. Each Muslim woman is a capable and autonomous individual. They are those who carry the burden of morality of our whole society.⁶²

The examples presented above show how Iranian Islamic feminists have tried to hinder the clergy's efforts to prevent women from active participation in political life by reinterpreting the sacred texts in the context of a specific language (Arabic). By emphasizing women's rights as citizens to interpret Qur'anic sources freely, Islamic feminists support and encourage women's participation in politics.⁶³ In doing this, they use different arguments presented in both religious and secular sources.

Islamic feminism in Iran can bring about a radical shift in rethinking gender in Islam. There is no doubt that Islamic feminists base their ideas and claims primarily on Islam and legitimize their activities with the help of the Islamic tradition. Yet, Islamic thought is not the only basis of Iranian Islamic feminists' ideas and demands. So, what we are witnessing in Iran is not an Islamic feminism that only works from within the frame of Islam to reinterpret sacred texts and bring them in line with Muslim women's new demands in our time, but it is, as some studies show, a movement that attempts to constitute a new discourse of women, albeit on religious grounds, by working from both inside and outside the Islamic legal and theological discourses.⁶⁴

What Factors Have Helped Islamic Iranian Feminists Rethink Gender in Islam?

Jonas Svensson has noted that the fundamental perception among Muslim feminists with whom we have so far acquainted ourselves is that Islam is a religion of equality. Therefore, a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an must show this positive view toward equality and convince us that the feminist interpretation is more accurate than other interpretations. Additionally, those verses traditionally seen as legitimizing oppression toward women should be reinterpreted so that they are in accordance with those mentioned above.⁶⁵

Iranian Islamic feminists see themselves as reinterpreting sacred texts. By emphasizing the historical context of the holy texts, they try to escape the paradox of another negative interpretation. Unique factors pertain to the Iranian

⁶² Azam Taleghani, "Mikhaham taklife rejal ra roshan konam" (I want to make clear the issue of rejal), *Zanan* 34 (1997): 6–7.

⁶³ See, for instance, "Komision *Zanan* dar goftego ba marzie sadigi" (The women's commission: A dialogue with Marzie Sadigi), *Zanan* 32 (1997): 4–5.

⁶⁴ Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms*; Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits"; and Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic."

⁶⁵ Jonas Svensson, "Muslimsk feminism Några exempel" (Islamic feminism, some examples), *Religio* 46 (1996): 76–77.

context that I think have contributed to this drive to rethink gender in Islam in a new and radical way. First is the fact that Iran has never been under Western colonial rule. Thus Iranians have had no sense of returning to or holding on to an “original” Islam and an “authentic” indigenous culture, as many researchers maintain is a response to the discourses of colonialism and the colonial attempts to undermine Islam and Arab culture and replace them with Western practices and beliefs. If we consider the importance of women in Muslim societies as guardians of culture, we can understand why the discourse of women is a discourse in which the history of colonial domination is inscribed.⁶⁶ As Badran has explained in the Egyptian context,

When Egyptian women moved into public space, inventing new roles for themselves or entering “male” professions, they understood their own advancement/liberation as “new women” to be intrinsically connected with the nation’s advancement/liberation. . . . Egyptian women’s feminism and nationalism and Egyptian men’s liberal nationalism signaled a united nationalist front during the independence struggle.⁶⁷

The Egyptian feminists’ strong nationalistic feeling, which is woven with their Muslim identity, is quite similar to that of many other feminists in the Arab world. In Palestine, for instance, when women are trying to build an autonomous movement, priority is still given to the liberation struggle and women’s struggles will still come as their second or third priority. That being the case, it is understandable that feminist women in Egypt and some other Arab societies legitimize their own discourse of revitalization and empowerment in the discourse of Islam and affirm their Islamic and nationalist dimensions. This also explains why in Arab societies a common counterattack on women’s assumption of agency as feminists—on behalf of gender and nation—has been to discredit feminists (and feminism) by branding them agents of Western colonialism. “In countries that were not colonized,” Badran suggests, “feminism is not attacked for being Western.”⁶⁸

Iran has never been colonized. Iranian people have not felt, therefore, any need to defend their “Persian identity” against “Western attack.” Still, Iranian national feelings have often stood against their Islamic identity. During those historical periods in which nationalism was emphasized, Islamic identity was weakened. Therefore, although the Islamic Revolution was indeed based on an anti-imperialistic driving force, many Iranians did not regard it as an anti-Western struggle to retain their national identity. Only religious fundamentalists regarded the Revolution as an attempt to preserve Islam from being under-

⁶⁶ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 130.

⁶⁷ Margot Badran, *Feminism, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 74.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

mined by Western values and ideas. In contrast, an important point of departure in Iranian Islamic feminists' struggle for equality has been the very presence of Western values and ideas. Iranian Islamic feminism, as discussed before, despite being attacked by fundamentalists, shows a new and radical way of confronting Islamic restriction laws about women by demanding a radical reinterpretation of the Qur'an and other sacred texts with regard to the needs of the time and with articulating contemporary schools of philosophy and thought.

One can also imagine the expansion in discourse being made possible by a combination of Islam as a state power and a very high degree of Western-influenced modernization. It is increasingly apparent that a new and broader feminist strategy is necessary when Islam no longer is the opposing force in domestic politics. Islam as a state power compels Islamists to deal with everyday politics in a society where modern Western ideas are integrated in citizens' ways of thinking already, whether they are male or female.

With a politically dominating role for Islam, the implication is that actors on all levels must deal with the built-in tensions that exist in the practice of Shari'a in modern times. This has provided openings for new interpretations of holy scripts to an extent unparalleled in the history of Islam.⁶⁹ In this regard, Iran exemplifies a positive case for the highlighting of how feminism can develop when religion must be integrated with modern thinking, where the affirmation of a national identity is not in opposition with the West.

The globalization of women's struggles for justice also has been important for opening a new discourse by Iranian Islamic feminism. Integration of the world through international trade, migration, faster and less expensive transportation, and new electronic communication and information technology have led, especially since the 1970s, to the intensification of the process of globalization. These changes have in turn brought deterritorialization, flexible identity, and an increasing number of multicultural, multilingual individuals who are adopting more fluid and multiple identities.⁷⁰ Globalization processes have affected feminist mobilization for change in many different societies. As Tohidi mentions, one of the effects of globalization has been intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.⁷¹ This and other effects of globalization have had important implications for women's status in all societies. Tohidi stresses that:

⁶⁹ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Divorce, Veiling, and Feminism in Post-Khomeini Iran," in *Women and Politics in the Third World*, ed. H. Afshar (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁷⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Alison M. Jaggar, "Globalizing Feminist Ethics," *Hypatia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 7; and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁷¹ Nayereh Tohidi, "The Global-Local Intersection of Feminism in Muslim Societies: The Cases of Iran and Azerbaijan," *Social Research* 69, no. 3 (2002).

As they become better informed about new and varied political alternatives in the world, populations become less likely to accept traditional models of political and gender regimes. . . . Even those who never physically leave their communities of origin are more likely now to evaluate their own lives by placing their rights, options, and restrictions in a comparative and global perspective. . . . Women, especially in the global South, are located at the center of contemporary globalization processes. Although local/national contexts are the primary sites for feminist struggles and intervention, global/international forums such as United Nations world conferences and transnational economic structures such as the IMF, World Bank, and transnational corporations have become more important in women's lives, hence requiring feminist intervention.⁷²

We are witnessing the flourishing of a global feminism in official and semi-official venues.⁷³ Different regional and world conferences on women, which have been mainly sponsored by the UN since 1975, and especially their accompanying forums for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have given rise to the development of a global cooperation among different women's organizations and also to the flourishing of a global feminist consciousness. After the 1995 world conference on women in Beijing, an amazing array of woman-oriented NGOs have developed in Iran. Many of these NGOs function as transnational networks for addressing regional or global concerns. The struggle of Iranian feminists, either secular or Islamic, has been strongly affected by the globalization of feminism.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, we are witnessing the flourishing of a feminist approach to Islamic law and sacred texts in relation to gender issues that indicate movement toward a new radical rethinking of gender in Islam. A combination of several factors, such as Islam being a state power, the globalization of women's struggle, and the lack of exigency of holding on to an "original" Islam and an "authentic" indigenous culture among Iranians, has paved the way for such a radical rethinking of gender in Islam in Iran.

In this article, I have sketched a path for rethinking gendered Islam in Iran. Since this direction is new, it is difficult to predict where it might lead. By showing how the Qur'an is inappropriately employed in the modern era, however, Islamic feminists will hopefully open a window of opportunity for women in Islamic countries and enrich their debate on women's issues in Islamic countries.

⁷² Ibid., 1.

⁷³ See, for instance, Tohidi, "Islam and Gender"; Zillah Eisenstein, "Women's Publics and the Search for New Democracies," *Feminist Review* 57 (1997): 140–67; Catherine Eschle, *Global Democracy, Social Movements, and Feminism* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001); and Jaggar, "Globalizing Feminist Ethics."