

**The Left, the Revolution, and the Woman Question:
Reflections on Theory and Method**

Val Moghadam
Illinois State University and
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Some of the more intense debates concerning the Left in Iran pertain to its strategies and organizational dynamics during the 1970s and to the positions it took in the early days of the Iranian Revolution and of the Islamic Republic. Debates and criticisms have revolved around: the efficacy of the guerrilla movement and the strategy of armed struggle; the Left's approach to Ayatollah Khomeini, to the provisional government, and to the project of Islamization; the Left's position on the woman question; and the Left's stance on ethnic nationalism. (See, e.g., M. Arman 1985; Moghadam 1987; Mirsepassi and Moghadam 1991; Shahidian 1994; Behrooz 1999.) Another critique, found largely within non-Left circles, has revolved around the so-called politics of authenticity. One version of this critique holds that the Marxist left was alienated and incapable of speaking the language of the people, in contradistinction to the clerical forces, who were presumably "from the people" and closer to them, socially, culturally, and spiritually. Although some of the most intense – and acrimonious – arguments have revolved around the Left and the Iranian Revolution, scholars also have debated the role of the Tudeh Party in the 1940s, its stance toward the government of Prime Minister Mossadegh, and its actions during the coup d'état of 1953 (see Abrahamian 1982, 2001; Behrooz 2001).

Much of the literature, in my view, is marred by an ahistorical and voluntarist approach that does not take into account structural imperatives and constraints and neglects basic sociological concepts. It is perhaps inevitable that theoretical and political analyses should evince ambiguity or even some confusion regarding structure and agency, necessity and choice, objective factors and subjective factors. It is instructive to recall Marx's observation that "men [and, I

would add, women, social movements, and societies] make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing". This statement captures beautifully the tension between structure and agency, but it has been all but ignored by most writings on the Iranian Left. Thus we are faced almost entirely with analyses that elevate agency, choice, and subjective factors to the highest level of determinacy, resulting in a proliferation of writings that accuse and attack rather than explain and theorize.

A social-scientific analysis of the Left – as distinct from a political manifesto – requires not only a description and critique of events in Iran but also contextualization and explanation via a theoretical framework and a comparative perspective. A theoretical framework allows one to formulate the questions, make sense of the data, and provide an explanation. For example, Marxist theory and social movement theory help to explain the structural, organizational, and discursive weaknesses of the Iranian Left before, during, and after the Revolution. A comparative perspective allows one to evaluate similarities and differences between the Iranian Left and, say, the Left in Nicaragua, rendering more systematic and balanced the conclusions made. Such a sophisticated theoretical and comparative framework may be found in the writings of Misagh Parsa (1989, 2001).

In my view, any assessment of the Left's guerrilla strategy, position on women, and approach to the national question needs to take into account the social-structural context within Iran, as well as the regional and international context, which includes political, organizational, and discursive factors. For example, knowledge of the competing strategies of the Old Left and the New Left in the Middle East (and Latin America, the U.S., Europe, India, and elsewhere) provide a context whereby some of the decisions made and positions taken by the Iranian Left are more adequately explained. A comparative perspective also helps to avoid the pitfalls of a culturalist analysis, which tends to present the influence of Shi'ism or Iranian male chauvinism as *sui generis*.

Theory and comparison could help to resolve the problem of agency versus structure. Theda Skocpol's now famous theory of revolution (Skocpol 1979) was meant to correct the previous over-emphasis on ideology, culture, and action that was then prevalent in social-science theories of protest, mobilization, and revolution. One can, of course, fault Skocpol for her own structuralist bias, but in my view hers is a more sophisticated alternative to the current focus on culture

and agency, which has been revived by the postmodernist tendency in the humanities and some social sciences. Culturalist and postmodernist perspectives alike overemphasize agency at the expense of structure. In the Iranian version of this paradigm, the Left is taken to task for not having confronted the Islamists more directly – or, in some critiques and for some groups, such as Peykar and the Mojahedin, for having confronted the Islamists rather too directly. The Left is attacked for being naïve, weak, and inexperienced – or for being opportunistic, manipulative, or self-serving. And it is condemned for having had the wrong position on the woman question.

In much of the literature, what tend to be ignored are issues of political opportunity, organizational strengths and weaknesses, social-structural features, and prevailing discursive frames. To elaborate on this point, I turn to the Left and the woman question in Iran, and introduce a theoretical and comparative framework.

Gender and revolutions: before and after feminism and globalization

In previous work, I have developed a model in which I classify revolutions by their (immediate) gender outcomes (Moghadam 1993b, 1997). This work was an attempt to bridge the divide between the feminist scholarship on women and revolutions and the more mainstream study of revolutions. In the former, women's roles in revolutions were recovered from historiographical obscurity and emphasized as important to the course and outcome of the revolution. Many feminist scholars also argued that revolutionary movements subordinate women's interests to "broader" or "basic" revolutionary goals, and that revolutionary states often marginalized or excluded women from power and enacted legislation that emphasized women's family roles. In contrast to the feminist scholarship, mainstream studies of revolution have tended to neglect women and gender issues; their description and analyses of revolutionary causes and outcomes focus on class, state, and world-system as key factors.

My work on gender and revolution has been an attempt to integrate gender analysis in the broader study of revolution, to recognize the social-structural salience of gender (like class), and to differentiate revolutions by their gender outcomes. It evolved from the simple observation that almost all revolutions involve the participation of women in ways that

disrupt pre-existing social relations of gender, and that revolutionary states are preoccupied with policies and laws pertaining to women and the family. In my review of the great social revolutions and various Third World populist revolutions, I found two types of revolutions and their implications for women and gender relations.

One group of revolutions falls into the "Women in the Family" or patriarchal model of revolution (the French Revolution, the Mexican Revolution, the Iranian Revolution), while others illustrate the Women's Emancipation, or egalitarian model of revolution (the Bolshevik Revolution and some Third World revolutions and states that were explicitly socialist, e.g., Yemen and Afghanistan). These are ideal-types, and it should be noted that in each case there have been differential effects upon women based on social class, race/ethnicity, and ideological divisions among women. Nevertheless, and thus far, revolutionary discourses and policies pertaining to women, the family, and citizenship seem to fall into the two categories of emancipatory or patriarchal revolutions.

The Women's Emancipation model says that the emancipation of women is an essential part of the revolution or project of social transformation. It constructs Woman as part of the productive forces and the citizenry, to be mobilized for economic and political purposes; she is to be liberated from patriarchal controls expressly for that purpose. Here the discourse is more strongly that of gender equality than gender difference. The first example, historically, of such a revolution is the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which especially with respect to its early years, remains the avant-garde revolution par excellence, more audacious in its approach to gender than any revolution before or since. Other revolutions that conform to this model – in some cases explicitly – include those of China, Cuba, Vietnam, Democratic Yemen, and Nicaragua (socialist or populist revolutions) and the Kemalist revolution in Turkey (a bourgeois revolution).

The Woman-in-the-Family model of revolution excludes women from definitions and constructions of independence, liberation and liberty, and sometimes expressly designates women as second-class citizens or legal minors. It frequently constructs an ideological linkage among patriarchal values, nationalism, and the religious order. It assigns women the role of wife and mother, and associates women not only with family but also with tradition, culture, and religion. The historical precursor of the patriarchal model was the French

Revolution, which, despite its many progressive features, had an extremely conservative outcome for women. The French woman's chief responsibility in the Republic was to be the socialization of children in republican virtues. In 20th century revolutions that had similarly patriarchal outcomes for women – notably Mexico, Algeria, and Iran – women were relegated to the private sphere despite the important roles they had played in the revolutionary movements. In these three cases, men took over the reins of power, associated women with family, religion, and tradition, and enacted legislation to codify patriarchal gender relations. Feminist studies in the 1990s on postcommunist Russia and East Central Europe would confirm that the political and economic changes there, too, conformed to the patriarchal model of revolution (see Einhorn, 1993; Moghadam, 1993a).

What determines such types of revolution and the gender outcomes? Here ideology and social structure are equally salient. In general, where revolutionaries are guided by a modernizing and socialist ideology, the revolution is more likely to be emancipatory in gender terms. Where revolutionaries are guided predominantly by religious or nationalist ideology, patriarchal outcomes are more likely to occur. In addition, pre-existing gender relations (the position of women within the society and economy), and the place of women within the revolutionary movement strongly determine the gender outcome. Pre-existing patriarchal gender relations are often carried over in the post-revolutionary situation, despite temporary disruptions in the course of the revolution, when women take part in protests and struggles. This is less likely to happen, however, when a "critical mass" of women has entered the public sphere in the pre-revolutionary situation, and when large numbers of women take part in the revolution and assume decision-making and leadership roles.

To summarize, structural determinants of gendered revolutionary outcomes seem to be: (a) pre-existing social structure and the nature of gender relations, (b) revolutionary ideology and the movement's goals, and (c) the extent of women's participation in the revolutionary movement and leadership.

Let us apply this model to the Iranian case. The immediate gender outcome of the Iranian Revolution was a patriarchal and regressive one, in part due to the pre-existing social structure and the nature of gender relations. In the 1970s Iran was a modernizing society, but a very dualistic one, characterized by a growing modern middle class and working

class alongside the older, more traditional, and larger urban petty bourgeoisie and rural population. In the 1960s, partly as a result of the modernizing efforts of the Pahlavi state, women's access to education, employment, and political participation improved, but these social changes, and the legal reforms that accompanied them, affected a relatively small proportion of the female population, mainly in the major cities (Tohidi, 1994; Poya 1999). Moreover, the unprecedented physical and social presence of women of the 1970s was met with a backlash in the form of an Islamist movement that went on to overturn the Pahlavi-era legal reforms, institute gender-discriminatory policies, and emphasize women's maternal roles. Opposition to the new gender regime was limited, emanating mainly from women leftists and liberals of the small urban upper-middle class.

Another major determinant of this outcome was the ideology of the revolutionaries. This pertains particularly to the Islamic revolutionaries, who were the dominant forces in the anti-shah revolutionary coalition and who went on to build an Islamic state. Theirs was a religious and cultural-nationalist ideology that called for the re-establishment of the traditional Muslim family and codified a patriarchal gender contract premised upon the male breadwinner and female homemaker ideal. In addition, although Iranian women took part in the massive street demonstrations, their slogans were those of the broader revolutionary coalition, and not those that might be more typical of women's interests (e.g., equality of women and men, women's autonomy and self-determination, full political and social citizenship rights, etc.). Most importantly, women were nowhere in the revolutionary leadership, which was dominated by clerics (exclusively male), male nationalist leaders, and male leftists.

In fact, there was probably greater female participation among the Left, but even so, women were a small minority among the guerrillas and the leadership. Many Iranian feminists have raised the question of why the Left forces were so ambivalent on the woman question after the Revolution, and why they were so hostile to feminism (Sanasarian, 1983; Yeganeh, 1982; Shahidian 1994; Paidar 1995; Moghissi 1999). I submit that, first, it had to do with the novelty of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and the distinctions that were being made throughout the world between bourgeois or radical feminism versus working-class or socialist feminism, and between "Western feminism" versus "Third World feminism". Second, it had to do with the socio-demographics of

participation and representation: the overwhelming presence of men in left-wing organizations versus the limited presence of women. This was a reflection of Iran's social structure: the absence of a "critical mass" of "public women" – educated, employed, politically active, vocal, and visible women. (The theory of the critical mass identifies 30 percent as the benchmark, the proportion at which the presence of women begins to make a difference.) There were, of course, some well-known communist women among the fallen guerrillas as well as in the left parties that emerged during and after the revolution. We are forever indebted to and inspired by the examples of Marzieh Ahmadi-Oskoui, Ashraf Dehghani, Maryam Firouz, and other communist women leaders. And in the immediate post-revolutionary period, the National Union of Women was formed – *but this occurred in the absence of a social movement of women*. The novelty of feminism as an ideology, the novelty of autonomous women's organizing, and perhaps most significantly, the absence of a sizable female working class precluded any real influence on the politics and positions of the left organizations. By contrast, in the case of the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks, especially Alexandra Kollontai, were organizing women workers as early as 1905.

In other words, I suggest that many earlier revolutions, including the Iranian Revolution, lacked the capacity to integrate women and gender concerns into their ideologies, goals, and state-building and legal projects due to structural reasons – the inexistence or novelty of feminism, the absence of an established women's movement or a critical mass of activist or "public" women, and the pre-existing strength of patriarchal gender relations and ideologies.

In an era of globalization and of global feminism, however, the social-structural context in which any future left-wing movement or revolution will occur has changed. Worldwide, a critical mass of activist women and women's organizations, including influential transnational feminist networks, as well as the diffusion of women's rights discourses worldwide, have changed the social relations of gender within societies and globally. Global feminism has emerged since at least 1985, when the third UN World Conference on Women took place in Nairobi and a number of influential transnational feminist networks formed. It has grown since 1995, when the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women (which took place in Beijing) resulted in the adoption of a Platform for Action and commitments by governments to implement its recommendations for women's equality and empowerment

(Moghadam, 2000). Moreover, women's caucuses were active at all the UN conferences of the 1990s – the conference on environment and development in Rio in 1992, the human rights conference in Vienna in 1993, the population and development conference in Cairo in 1994, and the world summit for social development in Copenhagen in 1995. During 2000, women activists from around the world, and representatives of increasingly influential transnational feminist networks, took part in the five-year reviews of the World Summit for Social Development and the Beijing Conference, writing position papers, lobbying delegates, and advocating stricter observance of timelines and benchmarks for implementation. It should be noted that many feminists active in Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe, including founders of transnational feminist networks, are veterans of left-wing parties and Third World revolutions. A careful examination of their literature shows the revitalization of a socialist-feminist discourse (Moghadam 2001)

These domestic social changes and global processes have served to bring greater legitimacy to demands for women's participation, autonomy, and citizenship. Now that feminist ideas have spread and women's rights are on global and national agendas, left-wing movements, revolutionary movements and state-building projects of the new century are more likely to incorporate women and feminism. Contemporary examples of revolutionary movements and states that have incorporated feminists or women's rights goals are South Africa's African National Congress, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, and Northern Ireland's republican movement. In these cases, the revolutionary ideology and women's major roles in the movements are far more amenable to emancipatory gender outcomes, and in South Africa have led to the deliberate integration of feminist claims in the legal framework and in economic policy. (See, for example, McWilliams, 1995; Subcomandante Marcos, 1995; Meintjes, 1998; Ponce de Leon, 2001.)

It is in the context of the emergence of global feminism as well as growth in the population of educated, employed, mobile, and politically aware Iranian women that feminism has taken shape in the Iranian diaspora and within Iran. Among expatriates, and especially within the expatriate Left, feminism is a very vocal and visible phenomenon. Within Iran, however, the picture is somewhat unclear. Has there emerged a social movement of women, or is the lively

women's press a stand-in for a fully-fledged social movement? Do Iranian feminists – whether secular or Islamic – have the capacity to influence the reform movement and compel it to take on feminist issues? Indeed, what are the prospects for socio-political transformation in Iran? Is there a role for a renewed Left? What's left, so to speak, after Islamization, feminism, and globalization? Is it the social democratic left that Afshin Matin-Asgari (this volume) discusses? These are questions for future reflection, research, and dialogue.

1. References

2. Abrahamian, Ervand. 1982. *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. Princeton University Press.
3. -- 2001. "The 1953 Coup in Iran." *Science and Society* vol. 65, no. 2 (Summer): 182-215.
4. Arman, M. 1985. "Marxism dar Iran: az enqelab-e mashruteh ta enghalab-e fevrieh", *Nazm-e Novin*, no. 7 (September).
5. Behrooz, Maziar. 1999. *Rebels with Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran*. London: I.B. Taurus.
6. -- 2001. "Tudeh Factionalism and the 1953 Coup in Iran." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3 (August): 363-382.
7. Einhorn, Barbara. 1993. *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in East Central Europe*. London: Verso.
8. Matin-Asgari, Afshin. 2001. "From Social Democracy to Social Democracy: The 20th Century Odyssey of the Iranian Left."
9. McWilliams, Monica. 1995. "Struggling for Peace and Justice: Reflections on Women's Activism in Northern Ireland." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 6, no. 4 and vol. 7, no. 1 (Winter/Spring): 13-39.
10. Meintjes, Sheila. 1998. "Gender, Nationalism and Transformation: Difference and Commonality in South Africa's Past and Present." Pp. 62-86 in Rick Wilford and Robert L. Miller, eds., *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition*. London: Routledge.
11. Mirsepassi, Ali and Valentine M. Moghadam. 1991. "The Left and Political Islam in Iran: A Retrospect and Prospects." *Radical History Review* 51: 27-62.
12. Moghadam, Val. 1987. "Socialism or Anti-Imperialism? The Left and Revolution in Iran." *New Left Review*, no. 166 (November/December): 5-28.
13. Moghadam, Valentine M. (ed.). 1993a. *Democratic Reform and the Position of Women in Transitional Economies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
14. Moghadam, Valentine M. 1993b. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers (ch. 3).

15. --. 1997. "Gender and Revolutions." Pp. 137-167 in John Foran, ed., *Theorizing Revolutions*. New York: Routledge.
16. -- 2000. "Transnational Feminist Networks: Collective Action in an Era of Globalization." *International Sociology*, vol. 15, no. 1 (March): 57-85.
17. -- 2001. "For Gender Justice and Economic Justice: Transnational Feminism and Global Inequalities". Paper prepared for the 42nd annual meetings of the International Studies Association, Chicago, 20-24 February.
18. Moghissi, Haideh. 1999. *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. London: Zed Books.
19. Paidar, Parvin. 1995. *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
20. Parsa, Misagh. 1989. *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
21. -- 2001. *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua and the Philippines*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
22. Ponce de Leon, Juana (ed.). 2001. *Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings of Subcomandante Insurgente Marco*. New York: Seven Seas Press.
23. Poya, Maryam. 1999. *Women, Work and Islamism: Ideology and Resistance in Iran*. London: Zed.
24. Sanasarian, Eliz. 1983. "An Analysis of Fida'i and Mujahidin Positions on Women's Rights." Pp. 97-108 in Guity Neshat, ed., *Women and Revolution in Iran*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
25. Shahidian, Hammed. 1994. "The Iranian Left and the 'Woman Question' in the Revolution of 1978-79." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2: 223-247.
26. Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
27. Subcomandante Marcos. 1995. *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
28. Tohidi, Nayereh. 1994. "Modernity, Islamization and Women in Iran." Pp. 110-147 in Valentine M. Moghadam, ed., *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*. London: Zed Books.
29. Yeganeh, Nahid. 1982. "Women's Struggles in the Islamic Republic of Iran." Pp. 26-74 in Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh, eds., *In the Shadow of Islam: The Women's Movement in Iran*. London: Zed Books.