

The major feminist
theoretical
perspective in iran
sociology essay



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Iranian women have fought for the equal rights throughout the 20th century. In this paper I intend to argue about feminism in the present urban communities in Iran. Iran is a vast country and discussing women situation in the rural areas makes this essay totally different. The women's movement in Iran has both expanded and transformed since the revolution. Before the revolution the liberation of women was connected to the process of secularisation. Under the Islamic Republic, however, women are increasingly making arguments for the expansion of their rights by pointing to protections under the constitution, while others are reinterpreting Shari'ah law. Some scholars have referred to the emergence of 'Islamic feminism,' a term that highlights the difference of approaches that coexist within the women's movement in Iran. As a result, the terrain of women's rights is one of unprecedented cooperation among disparate groups on the one hand and severe ideological and political struggles on the other.

In discussing these approaches in present urban areas of Iran, it is of vital importance to distinguish between three groups of women who I will talk about them. The first group is women who identify themselves as Secular feminists and are under the influence of women movement in western societies. The second group are women who try to reach equal rights for men and women but as they try to do so under the guidance of Islam and national identity, they make a distinction between themselves and western feminism which they believe will lead to corruption as there is now in the West. They can be named state feminists or Islamist feminists in Islamic Republic of Iran. Minoo Moallem writes about one of these women, Zahra Rahnavard who is one of the equal rights activists and the wife of opposition

leader Mir Hossein Musavi in the recent demonstrations against government after the 2009 presidential election in Iran:

Zahra Rahnavard ... charged the West with being a system where women are made into “ decorative objects.” She calls upon her Muslim sisters to question what the “ sham civilizations” have made of women, not to act like dolls, and not to display a debilitated will. She asks women to refuse to be part of the harems of the rulers and the communal harems of the streets. Her allusion to the collective appropriation of women in the streets and her rejection of unveiling have made it possible for her to think of contractual structure of the Muslim family and veiling as sites of women’s agency. For Rahnavard, it is through unveiling and Westernization that Muslim women have been turned into objects to be possessed by all men in the public sphere. To resist capitalist rulers and challenge sexual objectification, she asks women to return to veiling and the Muslim family, where women are considered subjects rather than objects of the marriage contract. (2005; 185)

The third group includes mostly secular educated women who are not familiar with the notions of western feminism but as a result of modernisation in Iran and under the influence of global mass Media are aware of women situation in other countries and try to simulate a modern life like the ideal type of a western woman for themselves. They have combined some traditional values of an Iranian woman and some modern values of a western woman. As Reza Ghasemi in his acclaimed novel, *The Nocturnal Harmony of the Wood Orchestra*, describes Iranian women in their transition to modernity:

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The history of invention of Modern Iranian women is like the invention of car. The difference is that the car was first a carriage with changed content (They removed the horses and replaced the engine) and then slowly the appearance changed but the modern Iranian women first changed the appearance and then when they had been looking for appropriate content, they faced the trouble... So everyone as to their personal tastes and their mental demands made a combination of traditional female with modern woman which can be stand in a range of a woman wearing Chador to miniskirt. This woman asks to share in all decisions, but asks all the responsibilities from man...She asks man to work equally in home but at the same time considers the man who works in home of poor character and weakness. (1996; 86)

Considering the distinction between these groups, I will argue about feminism as a political movement to gain equality and to free women from oppression in Islamic republic of Iran and the role that each group plays in obtaining this goal.

Liberal Feminism:

Actually in today's Iran, liberal feminism is the only perspective that can hardly breathe under the pressure of the Islamic government. This feminism always has two aspects which are against the government's will in Islamic republic of Iran. Abdee Kalantari believes that in a political theology that divides the political sphere into good and evil and sees the west as enemy (evil), feminism as a modern western movement is a threat to the whole existence of this theology (2007). In other hand, fighting for the equal rights in law usually opposes Islamic rules which are not easy to face. Hence, <https://assignbuster.com/the-major-feminist-theoretical-perspective-in-iran-sociology-essay/>

women movement not only has to fight with the deep traditions of Islam in the society but also to protect itself against the fundamentalist government which obtains its legitimacy from these traditions.

The Islamist ideology denies women individuality, autonomy and independence and this is inside this Ideology that the key objective of Iranian's women's rights activists, both secular and Islamic, became the modernization of family law and women's equal rights in matters of marriage, divorce, and child custody. Other concerned issue is domestic violence, with many articles in the feminist press describing domestic violence as both a social problem and a violation of women's rights. A third concern was women's under-representation in formal politics and the need for greater participation in parliament, the local councils, and the highest political offices. These are the reforms that both Islamist and Secular activists are still fighting to reach them.

The Islamist feminist do not seek to deny the rules of law and they insist on the preservation of Islam, family and marriage even when it comes in opposition of equal rights. Their aim is to suggest a more flexible interpretation of Islam rather than the one that the government presents. This group can be criticized in the same way that Zillah R. Eisenstein's has criticized the liberalism because of feminizing the private sphere and the separation they make between public and private spheres. She argues that this separation could be the basis to liberalism's downfall. As it becomes clear that liberalism is incompatible with equal rights for women, feminism will search for alternative grounds to build its agenda. This gendered

separation of spheres will lead liberalism to a lack of concern with the forms
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of oppression that take place in the private sphere(1981) and that is the same concern that secular feminist in have in Iran.

In contrast, the secular feminists work through small-scale Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) and try to develop some analyses of women's collective interests and their oppression in private as well as public life. They have noticed the issues that have been argued in the history of feminism in the west. They write about equal rights as well as body, sexuality, power, homosexuality, violence, pornography and so forth. The problem is that they cannot publish their ideas and normally internet is the only media they can use to raise their voice to be heard. There are many feminist websites that represent this group and they keep working despite the filtering of the government. (e. g. <http://www.irwomen.com>, <http://www.meydaan.com>, <http://www.feministschool.com>) . Hence, the middle class urban women are the most common audiences of these activists, since the other groups access to the internet is limited. This lack of audience urges this question that whether there is a feminist women movement in Iran? If there is, will it stand against Repression, censorship and attacks of the fundamentalist government and even the traditions of a religious based society? As Ahmadi argues that secular feminism faces two barriers in its way, first is the framework of an Islamic republic where fundamentalists hold absolute power over certain state institutions and the other is an " inside force," a " from within" perspective which has been needed to alter the dominant fundamentalist discourse"(2006). Hence, in obtaining liberal demands of women movement in Iran is of vital importance for secular feminism to keep its unity with the Islamist feminists, since as Ahmadi

elaborates it is the group that not only can expand the domain of dialogue with clerical scholars, but also are able to overcome long-term hatred toward western feminism in Cultural context of Iran (2006)

These activists could have been labelled as a group of urban middle class ladies who could not be regarded as speaking for all women in Iran until the August 27th of 2006, when they launched a campaign named “ One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws”. The aim was to collect one million signatures in support of changing discriminatory laws against women in their country, but what made this effort important and even a danger for the government, though the organizers of the campaign considered that its demands conform to Islamic principles, was the way they used to collect these signatures. The concept is simple and revolutionary, melding education, consciousness-raising and peaceful protest. Starting last year, women armed with petitions began to go to wherever other women gathered: schools, hair salons, doctors’ offices and private homes. Every woman is asked to sign. But whatever a woman decides, she receives a leaflet explaining how Iran’s interpretation of Islamic law denies women full rights. The material explains how Iran’s divorce law makes it easy for men, and incredibly difficult for women, to leave a marriage, and how custody laws give divorced fathers sole rights to children above the age of 7.[i]

The One Million Signatures Campaign is a new and innovative movement because it has not taken shape around one progressive and famous central figure, rather it is a broad movement, where activists visit with other women, engage in face to face discussions with them, they go home to home, and explain to each woman about women’s rights. Any signature is equal to <https://assignbuster.com/the-major-feminist-theoretical-perspective-in-iran-sociology-essay/>

conscious these activists tried to make for women from any background and any class. Their main goal is to create a dialogue among citizens and educate them about their rights and it makes women to become sensitive to their status under the law and in society. It seems that the Consciousness raising groups are the inspiring idea of this campaign. The Idea that women should gather in small groups and give accounts of their own lives and how they ' became' a ' woman' and then they will understand to which extent, they share similar problems with other women with different backgrounds and ages and these problems produce by social relations and institutions. As Pilcher and Whelehan argue we can consider the main success of these groups in inspiring many women to turn to feminism (2004) and that is the same success that Iranian secular feminists try to reach. They hope to involve women, not all of whom were actively involved in feminism, but all caught up in the debates of the time and seized by the urge to fight for their equal rights in law and make the process of one woman's coming out of false consciousness into enlightenment, possible.

The campaign success in changing the laws is comparable with NOW, (National Organization for Women) founded by Betty Friedan in 1966, as both expressed not as a self-conscious political theory, but as a ' common sense' application of pre-existing values to women's situation. As Bryson argues NOW's campaigns gained some early legal victories changing laws and could amend the United States constitution to give women equal rights which very nearly succeeded, and it has been a major force in changing attitudes to women in education, employment and the media. Despite the criticisms that later feminists made about equal rights campaigns such as NOW for focusing

narrowly on formal legal and political rights which ignores economic (2003), cultural and sexual exploitation and oppression of women, I think that such campaigns are the basic steps of opening debates about other forms of oppression in the traditional and religious society and fundamentalist government of Iran that will take a position against such debates in that level.

Marxism Feminism vs. Post Feminism:

Since Russia has been the most powerful neighbour of Iran in the contemporary history, this country has had a great influence on the history of Iran. That is why Marxism as an ideology has the greatest effect on the history of modern Iran after Islam. Before the Islamic revolution in 1979, Classical Marxists worked within the conceptual notions laid out by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other nineteenth-century thinkers and dreamed of a society without classes as they believed that existed in USSR. These groups were an undeniable factor in the triumph of revolution, but due to vast suppressions and executions of the new Islamic government in 80s, these groups lost their power and prevalence within the society, but the Marxism discourse has still an inevitable impact on the Iranian intellectual prospect.

The secular feminist as a part of Iranian intellectual discourse are not an exception. This group besides the equal rights movements has always tried to theorize the roots of patriarchy in Iran and Marxism feminism has been one of the most useful perspectives for them to do this work. Many of these theories regard classism and capitalism as a key factor which work parallel with patriarchy in women's oppression (Look at Afshar; 1983). This analysis suggests women to fight with all the displays of capitalism to free them from <https://assignbuster.com/the-major-feminist-theoretical-perspective-in-iran-sociology-essay/>

oppression. They criticize the new Iranian woman in her support of capitalism and the way that Iranian women present their bodies which is one of the most important areas they see as capitalism system uses to oppress woman. As Shahidi states a practical consequence of this approach to the “ woman question” was the de-sexing of woman, clearly visible in the baggy clothes and absence of cosmetics among female activists. These women oppose the compulsory veil but believe that with or without a scarf, a woman-doll will remain the same (1994).

In the contemporary history of Iran, the woman body has been the main indication of political change.[ii]It is an interesting point that the binary of mind/body which is traceable in western thought, present itself in Iran with the beginning of the project of modernization. Reza shah saw unveiling as one of the most important markers of Westernizing and the Islamic republic made veiling compulsory in order to make an anti-western society and in all these fundamental changes women’s body has been the object of change. If the Reza shah project made many women to stay in home and even quit going to school[iii]the veiling did not make the modern Iranian woman who I recognized them as the third group of women who make efforts having equality with men, to leave the public sphere. They continued to work and study alongside men and they used their body especially their faces to object compulsory veiling which had tried to ignore their body. Young and older, the Iranian women defy the Islamic hijab publicly, and confront the state’s Islamic body politics with a body politics of their own. The youth mock the Islamic hijab, deconstruct it, reform it, and make it succumb to their modern desires. They reveal their hair in public by pushing back their

mandated headscarf, transforming it into a garment used for their beautification. Against all cultural mandates of the Islamic state, they reveal their body curves under their remodeled and modernized “Islamic” garb. They wear loud makeup, walk elegantly, and bring their sexuality to the public. They reject the control of their body by the state, and celebrate their womanhood by defying the Islamic hijab. Since eyes, nose and hands are the only features on show, eye make-up is applied with scientific precision and Tehran has become the nose-job capital of the world. Iranian women spend one million dollar in make-up industry every year[iv]

Oppressing by the government and morality police, these women have been always criticised by a large group of secular feminists who believe that wearing make-up and presenting the sexual body are the representation of objectifying woman by capitalism. Ezzat Goushegir in his praise of Ariel Levy's book; *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, writes in his personal weblog[v]that this is the same raunch culture in Iran that in the universal capitalist system, uses the ideas of feminism about equality and emerge women to appear as a face of capitalism in the society and by this way marginalizes the true demands of women movement. He considers Marxism as a perspective that challenges this objectification and Commodification[vi]. (2007)

Marxist feminists believe that cosmetic surgeries and make-up industry are two effective instruments of capitalism which not only objectify women, but also make them to pay money for correcting their body image into the Ideal body of Capitalist society. They deny these things as Levy denies them to be liberating and rebellious. Levy argues that how women decide to give

meaning to sex industry by producing the fake idea that presenting their
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sexuality would empower them (2006). I am not going to criticize this book and even I agree with Levy to some extent. The problem is that how Iranian feminists use the book and translate western feminists' ideas to apply them on the totally different context. Levy in this book refer to sexist TV shows which distribute the illusion of liberation among women, shows that means the pornoization of culture for Levy (2006). It is the culture that benefits Capitalism, but how about Iran? As I mentioned the history of Iran is not the history of capitalism, it is the history of religious ideology. In Iran power is not within the bourgeois' class but at least in contemporary Iran in the hands of clerics (Mullahs) who do not necessarily own economical capital. The most obvious reason for this claim is that the opposition in Iran never could blame the leaders of Islamic republic for having wealth. This is religious capital that structures the power in Iran and ironically this power agrees with secular feminists in the issue of objectification of women and two different thoughts leads to same consequences in the cultural context of Islamic Iran.

If Levy talks about shows such as *Girls Gone Wild in America*, Iranian Women appearing in television programs will not be allowed to wear make-up because it is against Islamic law, "repulsive jokes" between men and women on television or radio is also prohibited[vii] No Magazine has the right to publish a woman's face on the cover and using plastic woman models with head (even with hijab) in clothing shops is forbidden. In this cultural context a new reality has emerged in Iran, a reality created by women. The Iranian women are playing an instrumental role in the grassroots challenge to the Islamic Republic through their deconstruction of the hijab and their direct challenge of the state's body politics. Challenging the Islamic dress code,

they use the everyday life as the site for gaining rights and respect from the society and the state. They demand the right to live as free women.

Humiliated, assaulted, and arrested randomly for being women, they have gained resilience, lost their fears of confronting the state, and battled the repressive social and cultural Islamic codes of conduct. Using deviance as a weapon, they are creating a reality unimagined by the architects of the Islamic Republic.

Naomi Wolf in her book *Beauty Myth* has the similar idea as Levi and argues that Women should be able to adorn themselves with pretty objects when there is no question that we are not objects. She believes that they cannot be free of the beauty myth unless they can choose to use their faces and clothes and bodies as one form of self-expression out of a full range of others. She claims that public interest in a woman's virginity has been replaced by public interest in the shape of her body (1991). We cannot ignore that Iranian women still live in a society that virginity is more than a public interest; it is a religious and legal rule. The rule that has been ignored by these women using solutions such as Hymenoplasty[viii] and this is a surprisingly hot topic in Iran. It is of vital importance to consider if any great theory which we believe in is applicable in other contexts. Wearing make-up and cosmetic surgery is kind of self-expression for Iranian woman, a self who express itself standing against the fundamental laws of ignoring her. It is a kind of resistance against the discourse of fundamentalism.

Hence, Body and sexuality is the battlefield of first and third groups. Two secular groups which must be united in opposition with fundamentalism that does not believe in basic rights for women, while both these groups to some <https://assignbuster.com/the-major-feminist-theoretical-perspective-in-iran-sociology-essay/>

extent believe in equal rights for men and women. The ironic side of this battle is that how secular Marxist feminism and Islamist feminism with two different approaches to women issue; blame the third group which is the main potential force of fighting patriarchy, to objectification of women or in their word for acting like dolls. It is true that strong roots of tradition still exist in the third group. They do not identify themselves as feminist because what they have learnt about feminism is women who try to work and wear like men; women who make them misunderstand feminism when there is not a long history of feminism in Iran to make the idea clear for them. Although they do not identify themselves as feminists they have almost same ideas with the new generation of feminists in west: the third generation or wave, which its life powerfully has shaped by popular culture, particularly music, television, film and literature as they believe to fight with women oppression. Media figures represent third wave icons in their tendency to refuse to adhere to a feminist party line, but also in their resistance to comply with the types of 'feminine' behaviour deemed compatible with media and mainstream success. (Pilcher& Whelehan; 2004) In other words these women as Genz and Brabon reveal are merging notions of personal empowerment with the visual display of sexuality. These women does not manipulate their appearance 'to get a man on the old terms' but 'has ideas about her life and being in control which clearly come from feminism' (2009; 93). Although these Iranian women do not identify themselves as feminist but their notions of sexual freedom come directly from the Iranian feminism that has fought for women freedom and equality during the last 100 years.[ix]

Secular feminism has two ways to walk in. The first is to stand against this group and blame them of objectifying their femininity and the other is to stand beside them to fight against fundamentalism which is the greater force of oppression for both groups than patriarchy. In the second solution I believe that Secular feminism should try to make other women familiar with basic notions of feminism such as economical independence and equal payments' and other non-radical ideas that is bearable for a society in transition to modernity and not completely modern. Secular feminist must notice that Islam as an ideaology has a great power in the life of even most of secular women. Mohanty in her article on the problem of western feminism on theorizing women issues in developing countries, referring to Modares, criticizes feminist writings which treat Islam as an ideology separate from and outside social relations and practices, rather than a discourse which includes rules for economic, social and power relations within society (1988; 70). Hence secular feminism which is affected by the west must look over the feminism history and experiences in the west and try to match them with the cultural context of Iran. I do not believe that feminism in Iran and west has to go to the same way. Although the third wave feminism is an idea that comes after the long history of first and second wave feminism in west, the Idea of sexual power that this generation emerge is the fact that young women in Iran practice against the government every day. This practice's influence is obvious by the number of morality polices that the government use to control these women. Hence, post feminism is a perspective that worth applying not only imagined as a chronological distinction between second and third wave feminism in the cultural context of Iran. This attitude in Iran must not consider as backlash

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but as a conjunct to the first group to be influent in Iran. Secular feminism has to satisfy these women who object feminist theories which failed to address their problems.

Conclusion:

In this essay I distinguished three groups of women who can be helpful to reach equality and freedom from oppression in the current cultural context of urban middle class women in Iran. The conjunction between secular feminists and Islamist feminists who try to find liberation through the organized movement for constitution amendment and consciousness rising is traceable. I see this trend as the most relevant perspective for Iranian society that benefits both urban and rural communities in Iran. In the second part I tried to criticize the orthodox Marxism that has a deep root in the history of Iranian intellectualism and its influence on secular feminism in Iran as well. I think that this trend will lead to a separation between secular feminist and secular women who both are fighting against the fundamentalism in Iran. Secular feminism, using the postfeminist notion of sexual power can analyze the practice of these women instead of blaming them to objectifying their sexuality. If feminists look at postfeminism as a turn to cultural differences and not as a chronological event in the west, they can move on faster and easier in the way of freedom from fundamentalism and patriarchy as well.

Notes: