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TITLE: Gender dynamics in Iran since the Islamic Revolution: Labour, Education and Civil Rights

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ABSTRACT

Gender dynamics in Iran have drastically changed since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty with the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Khomeini. The status of women has been significantly worsened by the political, economic and social changes of the Post-Revolutionary Iran. The factors that determined and magnified the gender inequalities are education, labour and civil and social rights—which include marriage, divorce, maternity, sex segregation, dress code, freedom of speech and spaces of solidarity—. Although education has historically improved, especially literacy levels, this is not directly translated into labour opportunities, and women struggle to find remunerated employment. Added, to the characteristics of the Iranian oil-producing economy and demographic issues, women are unable to access the job market, limiting their financial independence. Civil and social rights also show the inequalities between genders and highlight the underlying consideration of women as second-class citizens. To reverse inequality, the necessary path towards women empowerment in Iran is to ensure access to education, fair labour conditions and equal rights.

Key words: Iran; gender; Islam; social status; education; labour; women's rights

RESUMEN

Las dinámicas de género en Irán han cambiado drásticamente desde la Revolución Islámica de 1979, que derrocó a la dinastía Pahlavi, sustituyéndola con la República Islámica bajo Jomeini. La condición de la mujer ha empeorado significativamente como producto los cambios políticos, económicos y sociales del Irán posrevolucionario. Los factores que han determinado y magnificado las desigualdades de género son la educación, el trabajo y los derechos civiles y sociales —que incluyen matrimonio, divorcio, maternidad, segregación sexual, vestimenta, libertad de expresión y espacios de solidaridad—. Aunque la educación ha mejorado históricamente, especialmente los niveles de alfabetización, esto no se traduce directamente en oportunidades laborales y las mujeres tienen dificultades para encontrar empleo remunerado. Sumado a las características de la economía productora de petróleo iraní y los problemas demográficos, las mujeres no pueden acceder al mercado laboral, lo que limita su independencia financiera. Los derechos civiles y sociales también muestran las desigualdades entre géneros y destacan la consideración subyacente de las mujeres como ciudadanas de segunda clase. Para revertir la desigualdad, el camino necesario hacia el empoderamiento de las mujeres en Irán es garantizar el acceso a la educación, condiciones laborales justas e igualdad de derechos.

Palabras clave: Irán; género; islam; estatus social; educación; trabajo; derechos de las mujeres

INDEX OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	English	Spanish
BC	Before Christ	Antes de Cristo
IR	International Relations	Relaciones Internacionales
POC	Person of Colour	Persona de color
LGTBQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Queer and more.	Lesbianas, gays, personas transgéneros, bisexuales, queer y más.
HDI	Human Development Index	Índice de desarrollo humano
GII	Gender Inequality Index	Índice de desigualdad de género
GDI	Gender Development Index	Índice de desarrollo humano relativo al género
PP	Percentual Points	Puntos porcentuales
MENA	Middle East and North African	Oriente Próximo y Norte de África
ROSCA	Rotating Credit and Service Association	Grupo de ahorro

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1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the characteristics that we usually use to differentiate people, such as their gender, their skin colour, the religion they profess or the country in which they were born, should not have the relevance that they have. But it is also undeniable that today, they remain the cornerstone for differentiation between people. Being aware of this relevance, we will focus our study on a small group of people: the women of Iran; women, in a country, in which the differences generated by these characteristics, by comparative analysis, are radicalized and extreme.

We will study its history to know its present, its culture to know its normative and legal environment and its most relevant thinkers to try to understand its essence. From the greatest of respects, we have decided to use the majestic plural to make all those thinkers, and especially those who with their struggle have managed to improve the conditions of women in Iran, co-authors of our work.

To address the central core of our research, we must begin by focusing on what is its specific object, what are the intended objectives and what method we will use.

1.1 RESEARCH SUBJECT AND JUSTIFICATION

The Middle East is a transcontinental region often forgotten by Western (and especially European) academics. Specifically, Iran is a very singular country, as, even though it shares several commonalities with its neighbouring countries, it remains unique as it is shown with its own language, the predominance of Shia Muslims, and its history of up and downs with western relations.

The Iranian Revolution constituted an inflexion point on the history of Iran, and its outcomes have affected the situation of its citizens, with particular significant consequences for women. Therefore, studying the dynamics of gender in Iran after the Revolution can help us to understand the roots of inequality, its relationship with religion and which are the areas of improvement to advance

towards a more equal, fair and progressive society. And, these conclusions, cannot only be applied to Iran but to other countries in the Middle East region and the entire World.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

1.2.1 General Objective

This paper aims to examine the Gender dynamics of Iran after the Revolution of 1979, understanding how the political changes have impacted the status of women, from then to the present days, and which are/is the main factor(s) of lack of equality between women and men that can be addressed to ensure empowerment.

1.2.1 Specific Objectives

It should be considered that gender dynamics and the status of women are abstract terms that lack quantitative analysis and often rely upon perception and comparison.

Also, it is important to notice that to fully understand the impact of the Revolution is necessary to acknowledge the previous historical period, therefore, the specific objectives are the following:

- i) To highlight the importance of the Islamic Revolution and its impact on gender dynamics in all realms: politics, economics and society.
- ii) To identify the status of women and the relationships with three determinant factors: labour, education and civil and social rights.
- iii) To determine the areas of improvement should be primarily addressed to advance towards a higher degree of equality and women empowerment.

1.3 METHODOLOGIES

This paper offers descriptive and analytical research on the topic. The structure of the research was defined by secondary sources of books about the Middle East with very broad subjects such as the Middle East, Iran and Gender and

Islam. After narrowing the topic down to the geographic area (Iran), the historical scope (the Iranian Revolution to the present) and the subject (gender dynamics), we examined, compared and summarised several secondary sources such as books and academic articles that can be found in the bibliography section of this paper.

Gender dynamics and the status of women offer many variables and factors, but we decided to focus on labour, education and civil and social rights as there are the ones that offer more objective, statistical and significant information to understand the problems and to define solutions to reduce inequality.

Also, as we wanted to focus on Post-revolutionary Iran, the majority of the secondary sources are quite modern, although, we did analyse some articles comparing Iran to the previous periods, and include those insights to exemplify the transformations and changes in the status of women in Iran. We also used several primary sources such as official documents from the Iranian government and official institutions such as the World Bank.

After the work was fully structured, we interviewed five Iranian women (primary source). We had very informal dialogues about their personal perceptions and life experiences, as well as very recent information that might not be available on academic texts yet. From these interviews we were able to reach knowledge, although aware of their subjectivity, of the factual situation of Iranian women in the daily tasks of their closest social and personal circle. We have tried to translate this information into the essence of our work trying to reflect the most personal and human sphere of Iranian women, within the theoretical and ideological framework of the most relevant thinkers of the Islamic world in Iran.

This introduction has defined, what is the object, the objectives we intended and the methodology that we have used in our research, we will now study its theoretical and conceptual framework. Thus, we will start by trying to understand what feminism is and what its evolution has been, and later on, transfer this phenomenon to international relations in general and then focus this movement in a field as specific as the Islamic world.

2. THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 CONCEPT AND EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM

2.1.1 *Conceptualisation*

Few issues generate as much controversy as feminism. Even something as simple as its mere conceptual definition should be, has generated rivers of ink and, due to the passion it generates, dialectical battles to sharpen nuances and semantics to encompass all sensibilities. Because feminism is much more than a concept. Perhaps the easy thing would be to start like this essay, murky, eclectic, but we will not; from the first line to the last, it will be the result of a conscientious, firm and passionate study of a fundamental matter. Thus, we will answer to the concept of feminism making it clear, as an inescapable premise, that feminism is the constant evolution of a necessity. Let us define feminism as simply as possible and after, it can be furtherly developed: feminism the principle of equal rights between women and men.

From there, Feminism is both a theoretical approach that questions the structural patriarchal order and symbolic roles attributed to both sexes and also a political, economic, cultural and ideological movement willing to overcome inequalities between men and women. Feminism nowadays understands that gender is socially constructed and defined by several assumptions that are irrelevant to genetic characteristics. However, feminism has evolved, both academically and methodologically, and the intersectional theories and the viral movements that we observe today are the process of several decades of struggle, theorisation and transformation (Walters, 2005; Humm, 1995; Beasley, 1999).

2.1.2 *Evolution*

Undoubtedly, Feminism has evolved and continues to evolve as it is a very dynamic and vivid movement. Certainly, to time-frame the changes of feminism, the Feminist theory uses the widely accepted theory of the “Four Waves”. However, it is very important to note that these waves do not necessarily represent ideological changes, but they show the priorities of women depending on the specific context of each period.

i. The first wave emerged during the end of the 18th century, recognizing the disparities between sexes in all the spheres, although they concentrated on the political differences. Women established a very strong political agenda, focusing on universal suffrage and extended towards other issues such as property rights, and education (Wollstonecraft, 1792; Woolf, 1929). After World War II women had demonstrated the capacity to earn an income and develop challenging physical activities, which made them essentially independent (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2005).

ii. The second wave started during the 1960s and focused on workplace and family rights, broadening the debate and their equality aspirations. Feminism was no longer focused on political ambitions but included now social and economic objectives (Friedan, 1963). As with all growing movements, there were internal ideological divisions. The most evident of them all was the one between the equality feminist and the radical or revolutionary feminist. While the former focused on anti-discriminatory policies and right concessions, the latter believed in the deconstruction of the patriarchal society's values, patterns and limitations. Regardless of the lack of agreement, they achieved important advances towards divorce rights, women employment, women in political offices, and reproductive rights (Whelenah, 1995).

iii. The third wave emerged as a reaction towards the mistakes of the second wave. While the second wave was not very diverse not inclusive, the third wave was willing to use the intersectionality lenses to develop theories such as the queer theory and to include all races, sexualities, economic backgrounds and identities opening the concept of woman. This was an unprecedented conceptual change as it included discriminated minorities such as trans women that not comply with the cis-hetero white feminism of the second wave. Women also reclaimed their sexuality and beauty, far from men-defined standards and assumptions (Walker, 1992; Snyder, 2008; Roth, 2004; Collins, 1990).

iv. The fourth wave is not different from the third in terms of conceptualizations, but it does include new approaches such as body-positive movements and sexual assault awareness. This last wave is characterized by

social media global presence such as the #MeToo movement and, in general, it moves feminism away from academics, giving it back to the women and the public spotlight (Chamberlain, 2017; Rivers, 2017; Diamond, 2009).

Feminism includes different disciplines, debates and fields of action, including the body, the gender-sex system, epistemology and language, psychology, arts and literature, sexology, philosophy, economics, technology, ecology, and, the most important for our research, International Relations.

2.2 FEMINIST THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Traditional International Relations categorise reality “according to binary distinctions: rational vs. irrational, international vs. domestic, anarchy vs. order, realism vs. liberalism, ally vs. enemy, etc. These differences make the models more understandable, but ignore the full spectrum of possibilities that can be found between the two radical opposites” (Prieto, 2020: 4).

Gender is another notion that has been formed in binary terms. Women are described as the virtual opposite of men: extreme antagonisms are sought in the concept of man-woman in all facets of life, in vital aspects as basic as they are primordial, to give that binary order normality by the cruellest imposition and in the most intimate points of existence: they oppose wife against husband or mother against father, endowing them with different, opposite and even conflicting individualities (Costello, 2019).

Women have been required to adjust to a male-defined feminine identity. As women are often described as chaotic, irrational, unpredictable and over-emotional, a “good-woman” is the one that is quiet, noiseless and silent. The notion of women being “chaotic” has been used as an excuse to keep them apart from the social and public sphere (Tickner, 1992; Smith, 2018).

It is very ironic that, even when the progress level of societies is measured by peacefulness and the capacity of understanding, when describing women those adjectives seem to be used as a synonym of weak (Prieto, 2020).

The conceptualisation of women has evolved drastically over the decades. In the West, before the 18th century, it was thought that women were much more sexual than men —to which the original sin undoubtedly contributed—, but after, this idea was reversed, creating the angelic and asexual woman's cliché of the Victorian era. Describing women as delicate beings that must be protected from rudeness, obscenity and any allusion to sex, is a perception that we can also find in Rousseau literature. It is also deeply rooted in the Arab traditional society where women should be protected from men, and society, being covered, quiet and restricted to domestic duties (Tickner, 1992; Sylvester C., 1994).

In International Relations (IR), the feminist theory is grouped within the reflectivist theory, together with constructivism, post-structuralism and postcolonialism. One of the main arguments of IR Feminism is the discipline is inherently masculine. It would be interesting to analyse if gendered IR is a consequence of the lack of women (participating), or if it is the lack of women the consequence of gendered IR (Keohane, 1988; Sylvester C., 2001).

Women have attempted to participate in IR and the public sphere; however, when they tried to climb the ladder to break the glass ceiling, they have been labelled with pejorative adjectives. For instance, during the twelfth century, Alice of Antioch engaged in a geopolitical strategy to seize control of territories after his husband Bohemond II died. At the time, she was described as “capricious”, “overly ambitious” and a “bad mother”, and after, she was dethroned and dishonoured (Minarova-Banjac, 2018: 24).

During the nineteenth century, women such as Germaine de Staël married ambassadors to be in contact with international political networks where they could converse “on behalf of her husband”. After criticizing Napoleon, Staël was described as “a monstrous figure who looks like a woman but spoke like a man” (Minarova-Banjac, 2018: 25).

It is important to mention that women were unable to pursue diplomatic careers until the twentieth century, being Brazil one of the leaders in 1918¹, followed by the US in 1920, Turkey in 1932¹, Spain in 1933¹, Denmark in 1934, Norway in 1939, France in 1945, Great Britain in 1946, Canada in 1947, Sweden in 1948 and Japan in 1949 (Aggestam & Towns, 2018).

Although gender has been systematically proven by anthropologists and sociologists and other sciences to be a social construct, the notion of men being inherently masculine and women inherently feminine still inflexibly rooted in many societies. According to this constructed role, women are nurturing and caring, and therefore, they are only considered for domestic labour instead makes them less capable to have a challenging job or an influential position. For instance, until the 1970s women diplomat could not marry without abandoning their career (Minarova-Banjac, 2018; Prieto, 2020).

The rising presence of women in the sphere of politics and IR shows a positive evolution towards a just and more egalitarian public representation. Nevertheless, the concept of inclusion is creating complex rhetoric as it is often used as a synonym of empowerment, and empowerment as a synonym of change, and, in fact, the three ideas are very different in notion and practice.

While Inclusion is the uninterrupted and coherent presence of women; empowerment is to return independence, freedom and rights to women; and change is a real and observable transformation. Although it is true that in order to change the situation of women, we need to empower them through inclusion, this process is not immediate and requires efficient policies, which is what IR Feminism is about.

As IR Feminism aims to be intersectional, it includes queer theory. The most essential feature of International Relations is human interaction, therefore, the representation of women and LGBTQ+ persons had and is having a meaningful influence in the fields of International Relations and Foreign Policy. And, even

¹ Although women were first able, legally, to be part of the external services, in these countries the legislation was abolished during the dictatorial regimes, interrupting their careers.

though more women are participating in those disciplines, the own structures of IR seem to be resisting the needed transformation (Ogg & Rimmer, 2018).

The Feminist main determination is to promote equality. Despite its etymology, feminism theory goes afar the so-called women's matters. It also examines the structure of global power, gendered spaces and institutions and configurations of inequality (Smith, 2018).

The theory of feminism challenges the realist views of power and its "socially constructed worldview" that is extremely state-centric, without analysing the state itself, and if the views and necessities of their citizens are translated into their foreign policy (Ruiz, 2004: 3).

In Traditional realism individuals are insignificant and the prominence of women is absolutely none, excluding feminist discussion from all international debates. The realist concept of security which is exclusively based on territoriality and sovereignty omits from its scrutiny important violent actions such as acts of rape, which are common during armed conflicts. IR Feminism wants to redefine the concept of security, expanding it and acknowledging human security is also essential to be able to begin to establish gender issues discussions (Ruiz, 2004).

Other authors, such as Tickner (1992) explain that traditional IR theories such as realism and liberalism are not incompatible with reflectivist theories such as IR feminism, but they have to open their horizons to include new actors and approaches.

A state-centric approach emphasis on national security and specific threats to the territory, but ignore global hazards and universal challenges. In a hyper globalized world where most countries are interdependent —particularly within their regions—, it is essential to broaden the lenses (Enloe, 1990). The current pandemic of Covid-19 is a suitable illustration of how global issues need collaboration and coordination to protect social —civilians— and economic characteristics rather than the national physical territory. Other examples of global threats are terrorism or climate change.

2.3 FEMINISM AND ISLAM

Islamic feminism is one of the branches of feminism, and it will be on this one, on which we will focus our study. Two pillars support the foundations of this multidisciplinary movement: the equality of all Muslims and its interpretation through the Quran as the central foundation. We say multidisciplinary movement and we highlight it especially for the idiosyncrasy of the Muslim world, which demands that feminism pervades all social, cultural, economic or political life, with more or less visible brushstrokes of deep religiosity that coloured the Islamic world (Afshar, 1985).

In this way, the fundamental characteristic of Islamic feminists will be to use feminist theory to interpret religious texts and try to find in them enough foundations to defend the equality of all Muslims, men and women. It advocates for equality of all Muslims, men and women, using the Quran as their central argument. Islamic feminists use the feminist theory to interpret religious texts (Wadud, 2006).

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muslims have questioned some of the legal aspects of Sharia Law that make distinctions between men and women, such as the veil, segregation, education, seclusion, employment, polygyny and concubinage (Afshar, 1985).

Islamic Feminism does not necessarily criticise Islam, as they believe that the concept of “silent and obedient” Muslim women is a wrong interpretation and social construction of the religious texts and teachings. Women such as Fatema Mernissi² (2002) believe that conservative Muslim men have manipulated the teachings to maintain a patriarchal system that undermines women rights and freedoms.

Islamic Feminist differs from secular feminism in that it integrates religious characteristics, but, as Asma Barlas (2019) claims, it is essential to include

² Although Iran is a theocracy that applies Shia Islam, Sunni authors such as Mernissi have made a dent in the Shiite debate in Iran, and it is important to reflect on their writings and opinions.

Muslim values in Muslim countries where political, economic, and social relationships are based on religion. Religion is rooted in society, and therefore it cannot be ignored by any social movement, let alone feminism.

Other intellectuals, such as Fatima Seedat (2016) argue that the separation between Secular Feminism and Islamic Feminism is unnecessary, as feminism should include never reflect a specific identity to be as intersectional and inclusive as possible.

In my opinion, this is not true. Intersectionality explains that all women should be included in the feminism movement, but it does not mean that every woman is facing the same issues and challenges. Although the ultimate goal of all women is to achieve equality, there are different approaches towards it. Person of Colour (POC) women or LGBTQ+ women do not face the same challenges as white cis-hetero women. Rhouni (2009) express that the same occurs with Muslim women, they face different issues that Westernised women do not experience or understand. Islamic feminist is just one of the many paths of feminism that understand the specificities of Muslim women around the globe, and this movement and its specific fight, is not weakening feminism, but strengthen it.

Also, Islamic Feminism offers has an important role in the awareness of Muslim women. Western countries often perceive Islam as an oppressive religion with old-fashioned values and an inflexible patriarchal structure. Islamic feminism is crucial to share with the rest of the world that Islam can offer feminism and that its true values are more aligned with equality than to the current system (Khorasani, 2010).

Islamic jurisprudence is not inalterable, for instance, new jurisprudences seeking to ban female genitalia mutilations, familiar law and employment opportunities are emerging. Ahmed Elewa and Laury Silvers (2010: 170) claim that modern Islamic feminist is attempting to restore “rights provided by God and the prophet but denied by society”.

Although we can observe some feminist role models such as Khawla bint al-Azwar³, the modern Islamic feminist started in the nineteenth century. One of the first Quranic exegesis was started by the Iranian poet Táhirh. During this century, other feminist authors emerged in countries like Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Syria and Lebanon, where the citizens had access to European feminist magazines. Therefore, an opinion network was created, promoting the intellectuality of women and the freedom of choice of their criteria, which inexorably entail the demand to discuss the relevance of women issues in their national press. (Stowasser, 1993; Amin C. , 2002)

During the twentieth century, Aisha Abd al-Rahman undertook the second Quranic exegesis, reflecting on feminist issues and writing biographies for the mother, wives and daughters of Prophet Muhammad, restoring the place of women in Islam. However, this criticism is not accepted by many Islamic Feminist that, either claim that the Quran should not be reinterpreted or ignored to achieve feminism, or either claim that looking at the Quran is useless to describe women rights because it is a male-centric text (Amin M. , 1992).

During the twenty-first century, several movements and reforms have emerged, willing to achieve equality in Muslim countries. For instance, the *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*, *Muslim Reform Movement*, *Sisterhood*, *Sisters in Islam* or *Musawah* (Mir-Hosseini, 2019).

2.3.1 How to analyse Feminism and Islam in Iran

The history of Islam shows that women have been gradually oppressed over the centuries, and during the early rise of Islam, female voices were taken into account. However, during what Leila Ahmed describes as the “transitional stage of Islam”, the egalitarian discourses that favoured women, elaborated by the *Sufis*, *Kharijites* and *Qarmatians*⁴; were ignored, in favour of the regulatory legal

³ *Khawlah bint al Azwar* was Saudi women, army leader and warrior that collected many military successes and achievements.

⁴ *Sufis* are practitioners of *Sufism* or Islamic mysticism; *Kharijites* were an ancient Islamic sect that originated during the *First Fitna* or First Muslim Civil War; and, *Qarmatians* were a controversial and rather violent branch of Shia Islam.

discourses with negative effects for women, becoming the oppressed gender in Islam (Ahmed L., 1922: 679).

When discussing Feminism in Islam, Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1998) suggests three different levels:

- i. The interpretations of Islamic texts, as authorized sources to explain social roles, legal rights and consequential relationships.
- ii. The domestic and regional traditional debates and historical beliefs.
- iii. The personal experiences of individual women and their communities.

Analysis of gender in Islam often focus on one of the three levels. On the contrary, along this document we will embrace all of them, including researches and fieldworks that concentrate on each of them separately, but also by reading the Islamic texts as primary sources of information and interviewing women to know their experiences and the inherent traditions of their regions (Mir-Hosseini, 1998).

Following Mir-Hosseini (1998) theory, the shariah-based analysis (i), is usually written by religious men and authorities, and very recently women. The texts are typically written in Farsi as they are aimed at the local population. The domestic debates (ii) often present a feminist-based form of analysis, including authors such as Leila Ahmed (1922), Riffat Hassan and Abdur Rab (2008).

These two levels of analysis are merging and their differences are becoming diffuse. While, feminist re-reading of Shariah texts emerged in Iran a decade after the Revolution, being the most prominent example is the “*Amendments to Divorce Regulations*” of 1992, feminist authors such as Mernissi are seeking the meaning of Islamic texts to offer some insights into the first level of analysis (Mir-Hosseini, 1998).

2.3.2 *The Feminist Perspective of Clerics in Iran*

It is a common generalisation to believe that clerics, as the material representation of religion and values, are among the most conservative and traditionalist, but in Iran, this is not necessarily true. As Mir-Hosseini (1998: 50-

58) explains, clerical thinking is divided into two opposite groups: the traditional *fiqh*⁵ and the dynamic *fiqh*. The pre-revolutionary school (traditional) make a literal reading of the texts and conclude that there is no discussion to have, as no one can argue the fairness of the Islamic texts.

On the contrary, the supporters of the dynamic *fiqh* are usually younger clerics, that believe in the contextual and material application of the rules. The ruling should depend on the subject. For example, it was forbidden to sell chess sets because they were used for *haram*⁶ actions such as gambling, but now, chess is seen as a brilliant mental sport that can benefit people intellect, and therefore, they are not *haram*. This application and interpretation of the text that the dynamic *fiqh* offers, have awakened the debate of women rights and freedoms: to what extent their roles are based in the religious text, and to what extent should they be based (Mir-Hosseini, 1998: 50-58).

Religious figures of great importance, such as Ayatollah Saanei, which is considered by many a *marja*⁷, advocated for major reform in women civil and social rights, claiming that if a woman wants to divorce and the husband rejects it, that is proof enough of a “hardship” marriage (Mir-Hosseini, 1998: 54-55).

Other young clerics like Mohsen Sa’idzadeh (1995) advocates for women to be part of any professional field, even becoming *marja*’. Although, it is important to mention that the very same year that Mir-Hosseini published the research work where he participated —*Rethinking Gender: Discussions with Ulama in Iran*—, he was imprisoned (Razavi, 2006; Kurzman, 2001).

⁵ *Fiqh* (in Arabic) means “deep understanding”, although the correct contextualized translation is “Islamic jurisprudence”. It can be defined as the understanding of divine law. In Iran, the *Ja’fari Fiqh* is part of the constitutions, and it is both, Conventional (traditional) and Dynamic *fiqh*.

⁶ *Haram* (in Arabic) means “forbidden” or “sinful” because it has religious implications. However, as the Iranian legal system is based on Shariah law, and therefore in the Quran and the Sunnah, the “sin” might have legal consequences. “Religiously prohibited” is a closer translation.

⁷ *Marja*’ (in Arabic) means “source to follow”, and it is a title given to make legal decisions.

A very thought-provoking idea, which undoubtedly shakes the predeterminations of women and Islam is Sa'idzadeh's conceptualisation of feminism. He believes that the inequality that can be found within Islamic law has nothing to do with the divine will, but with a mistaken misinterpretation of male jurists (Kurzman, 2001).

We have studied the conceptual theoretical framework in which we will develop our research; We have studied the meaning of the term feminism and the specific world in which we will focus its development.

We will now turn to the centre of our research: the situation of women in Iran, trying to study the reality of women in Iran to obtain the most exact vision of the role they play in their society. We will study the historical evolution and its current situation, from a global vision, but also from the concrete aspects that we consider most relevant so that its study gives us the exact knowledge of the situation. We will study their world of labour, their role in education and their concerns in the aspects of daily life that affect their authentic role in their society.

3. RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

3.1 INTRODUCTION: THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Gender studies use several criteria to determine the status of women in a determined territory, including access to education, access to healthcare, mortality, life expectancy, marriage, age, preference for sons, political participation and employment among other civil rights and social freedoms. There are several indexed that can help us to measure the relative status of women (Haghighat, 2014).

The Human Development Index⁸ (HDI), which is the most popular one, can be segregated in sexes. In 2019, Iran male HDI was 0.87, while female HDI was 0.73. In terms of HDI ranking, Iran is the 70th country. On the contrary the far more accurate and completer, Gender Inequality Index⁹ (GII), places Iran 113th in the ranking; and the Gender Development Index¹⁰ (GDI) in the 138th position (UNDP, 2021).

In 2019, of all over-25-years-old Iranians, 72,8% of men had secondary education while only 67,4% of women had it. But, the most scandalous figure of Iran demographics is the labour force rate over-15-years-old), while on men is 71,5%, in women is 17,5% (UNDP, 2021).

To better understand these trends, is crucial to analyse the evolution of the role of women and how the Revolution constituted an inflexion point in many aspects of the political, economic, social and even personal, rights and freedoms.

⁸ HDI includes life expectancy, education and several per capita income indicators. It (theoretically) ranks from 1.000 (very high development) to 0.000 (poor development).

⁹ GII measures maternal mortality ratio, adolescent birth rates, political participation, secondary education, labour market participation. It (theoretically) ranks from 0.0 (perfect equality) to 0.8 (absolute inequality).

¹⁰ GDI addresses life expectancy, education and income. It should be compared with the HDI to see the actual fluctuations of inequality in the development of a territory.

3.2 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

3.2.1 *The Pre-Revolutionary Iran*

Beginning with a simple and quick historical composition of the situation, the pre-revolutionary Iran was far more Westernised than today's Iran. The use of the expression "westernised" only describes the exceptional situation of women in those days of Iran, with a very hostile historical and geographical context.

While some look back with nostalgia to the most "progressive" decades, others describe it as a dark period where Iran separated from its traditional real values. What is objectively true, is that women have been the ones that have undergone the dramatic consequences (Kousha, 1992).

In 1929, Iranian women and men adopted European dress etiquette, and only a few years after, in 1936, the veil was banned in the country. Many Iranians understood the removal of the veil as *haram* but also as an attack towards their culture of modesty and their long-held traditions. However, the removal of the veil did not give instant freedom to women, their modern appearance was an illusion that hid the reality of the internal society and their families, where women still heavily controlled and suppressed (Kousha, 1992; González & Pastor, 2020).

Nevertheless, pre-revolution years brought some major advances towards women rights and freedoms: there was a sensible decline in the upper-class polygamy, universities opened their door to women, *sigheh*¹¹ was socially unacceptable, and there was a gradual increase of working women (Kousha, 1992: 27).

¹¹ *Sigheh* (in Farsi), also known as *nikah mut'ah* (in Arabic), can be translated into "temporary marriage" and allows Muslim men to marry a woman for a pre-determined time, without the need of any officials or witnessed, having sexual relationships during the agreed period and then leaving her without egal divorce. *Sigheh* can last from a few minutes to several years and the husband should not be responsible for financially supporting her wife. There is an ongoing debate about to what extent can this practice be considered legal prostitution.

This progressive environment allowed Mohammed Riza *Shah*¹² to introduce new regulations like the so-called Family Protection Law of 1973, which established that child custody should be granted depending on the ability of their parents, and set limitations to polygamy. The first wife should give consent unless incapable of wifely duties, and she had the right to divorce if his husbands wish to second-marry against her will. Nevertheless, although this legislation was very important conceptually, in reality, Iranian women are absolutely financially dependent on their husband, making divorces highly unlikely and the law fairly useless (Kousha, 1992: 28).

The pre-Republic Iran also brought advances in others fields such as education, women experienced the secularization of the education, being able to attend the university in 1935. Also, they gained the right to vote in 1962, achieved rights of divorce, achieved free abortion in 1974 and the ban on polygamy and the right to maintenance after divorce in 1976. And, regarding the dress code, by 1978 the majority of women in urban areas of Iran were not wearing the *chador*.¹³ The majority of these advances were prohibited, banned or discouraged when the Revolution began (Afshar, 1985).

3.2.2 *The Post-Revolutionary Iran*

The causes of the Revolution are various and varied, but most of them relate to the anti-western sentiment of Iranians. The Western-led changes in the economy lead to the enrichment of some classes but the improvement of the poorest. Many Iranians were abruptly relocated to urban slums or other countries, abandoning their traditional and tranquil rural lives (Keddie, 1980).

¹² *Shah* (in Farsi) can be translated to “king” and is the title of the emperor of Persia. The last dynasty (and the only one mentioned in this paper) is the Pahlavi dynasty that ruled the “Imperial Estate of Iran” from 1925 to 1978. Reza Shah reigned from 1925 to 1941, abdicating during the Anglo-Soviet Invasion to his son Mohammad Reza Shah that reigned until he was deposed during the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

¹³ *Chador* (in Farsi) is a piece of clothing worn by women in Iran and other Persian-influenced countries. It is a full-body-length cloth with no hand openings and space to fit the face. Although before the revolution *chador* patterns were colourful and the black colour was reserved for funerals, currently some women in urban spaces, and the majority in rural areas, use the black one in public spaces. It is not mandatory and women can use a veil instead.

The West interfered in many political, economic and military decisions of Iran such as oil matters, military treaties and the Suez Canal struggles. The power of Israel, which is a declared political enemy of Iran and with which they are still having—even nuclear—disputes, was perceived as a phenomenon caused by western imperialism. The Middle East as a whole served as an example of how Western-styled liberal governments were inefficient to solve national problems and became *de facto* oligarchies (Keddie, 2006).

The Revolution was disruptive for all spheres of Iran: politically, economically and socially. And, as obvious as it seems, society in general, and women in particular, experienced far-reaching changes. With the rise of *Ayatollah*¹⁴ Ruhollah Khomeini into power, as the *Supreme Leader*¹⁵, the Islamic Republic of Iran was created (Keddie, 1980, 2006).

The Revolution advocated for a return to traditional Islamic law and Persian values. And we said that especially, women experienced (and we could say suffered) these changes because it absolutely affected all aspects of their lives. And it hit where it does the most damage: in the values that develop trust and self-esteem. Traditional values made men believe that housework is the exclusive responsibility of women, and therefore, the labour structures and the job market reproduce the inherent gender inequalities. Therefore, Iranian women are perceived as mothers, wives and caretakers and never as professional capable individuals. That alleged null professional capacity relegates them from the world of work, which in turn, isolates them from the social world, undermining the confidence and self-esteem of themselves and on others (Kousha, 1992; González & Pastor, 2020).

The private and public spheres are not divisible realms, but they are interdependent and deeply interconnected. What women experience in their

¹⁴ *Ayatollah* is an honorific title for Twelver Shia Clergy in Iran and Iraq. Although the term was widely used during the 20th century, it has devaluated during the 21st century because of its widespread use.

¹⁵ *Supreme Leader Authority* is the legal term to designate the head of state and the highest religious authority in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The current *Supreme Leader* is Ali Khamenei, that substituted Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989.

private lives —family, traditions, background, residence, marriage, etc.— affects, and it is affected, by their public lives —dress-code, education, work, space segregation, etc.— (Kian, 2014).

A historical milestone comes to remove the old prevailing structures. The 1991 war with neighbouring Iraq. The so-called Imposed War, which ended without a clear winner, arises from the traditional rivalry and Iraq's intention to annex territories (the Shatt al Arab region). As was the case in Europe during the world wars, the presence of men on the front lines gave women a fundamental and novel role in many key points of the country's economy and society (Keddie, 2006; Kousha, 1992).

During the Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, during, and especially at its end, women played an indispensable role as cooks, nurses or seamstresses. Those who were forced to flee their houses or widows were essentially alone, and without the presence of their husband, they became the only source of income of their households (Kousha, 1992).

According to Mehrangiz Kar (2003) many of these women, that lacked the license or the capital, started to perform some of their tasks, first informally and then professionally, transforming their abilities to paid occupations. In their own houses, they founded small sewing, cooking and hairdressing businesses. Slowly, they started to open their businesses to the society, trading hand-made products in the *Bazaar*¹⁶ and allowing them to be in direct participation with the public sphere for the first time in a decade.

This trend of self-employment arrived at middle-class women as well, which, as they had a wealthier household and less financial worries, would become poets, writers and translators. Moniro Ravanipour was one of the most popular writers and focused her texts on the world of women. Other artistic positions were far more restrained, for instance, there were only two female film directors: Shahla

¹⁶ In the Iranian context, a *Bazaar* is a market area where merchants meet. The role of Bazaars was key in urban areas, as they constituted the centre of all economic activities and social exchanges, being the most important public place for Iranian society.

Riyahee directed “*Marjan*” in 1954 and Marzaieh Brumand directed the cartoon “*City of Mice*” (Fischer, 1978).

Throughout the 20th century, the women of Iran exhibited a high degree of endurance and flexibility to adjust to the abrupt changes that their right and freedoms have suffered.

3. 3 THE SITUATION IN THE CURRENT IRAN

The very evolution of historical events despite the complicated and difficult mobility of the socio-political estates of Iran leave a current panorama that we can study from three aspects. Those that we consider most relevant to know exactly what is the role of women in Iran, from all perspectives. The three pillars that will focus our study will be work, education and civil and social rights. The intersection between them, both sought after and unavoidable will allow us to obtain the most accurate information on the situation of women and feminism in Iran.

3.3.1 Labour

At this point, the importance of studying women's access to the labour market and their situation at work does not need any justification. The importance of labour structure is very well defined by Danièle Kergoat (2001: 78-88), who wrote “gender division of labour, which is a form of social division of labour, assigns men to the sphere of production and women to the sphere of reproduction.” Separation and hierarchy oppress the women horizontally and vertically, and “as a result, men obtained valued social functions in political, religious, military and economic realms” while women are destined for caring, charity and reproductive duties.

The Revolution counted with the massive support of low-income rural women, and to maintain their imperative backing, Khomeini compared women office-workers with “painted dolls that displace and distract men, bringing degradation to the workplace” (Afshar, 1985: 260).

According to the traditional jurisprudence, influenced by Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari¹⁷ among others, household's expenses are the responsibility of the man. This justifies that women should stay at home if there is no financial necessity and they should receive half of the inheritance as they do not have financial needs. Policies were especially regressive during the presidential term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Kian, 2014).

Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani¹⁸ was convinced that the professional life of women was imposing a huge burden on them and that having to divide their time and efforts between work and family would result in failing to fulfil their duty of motherhood. To exemplify his opinion, he stated “despite all the efforts of the so-called [Western] liberated women, [they] have never had an impact on the political or military destiny of their countries.” (Afshar, 1985: 260).

In 2014, Khamenei declared that “Islam authorises women to work outside of the households. Their work might even be necessary but it should not interfere with their main responsibility that is childrearing, childbearing and housework.” This policy is very vague and lacks concrete measures to enhance women's participation in the job market —unless, is extremely necessary as due to segregated spaces women have to be teachers, nurses, gynaecologists, etc.— (Kian, 2014: 336).

The traditionalist opposition towards women working rights can be explained in the very social structure of Iranian society. Gender inequality is rooted in the absolute women (economic and social) dependence on men. Traditionalists fear the independence of women. However, many women are job-seeking because they are afraid to be left alone without economic support, due to the divorce privileges granted to men since the Revolution.

¹⁷ Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari was an Iranian philosopher that had a great influence on the principles of the Republic, he was indeed, the Chairman of the Council of the Islamic Revolution when he was assassinated in 1979 by Furqan Group (also known as Sura Al-Furqan), a Shia anti-clerical Islamist militant group.

¹⁸ Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani was one of the founding fathers of the Revolution and he was the fourth President of Iran.

Gender and social norms can be reformed by granting women access to education, resources and related jobs. Nevertheless, the Iranian job market is very specific as it shows two massive gaps: A social and economic gap between the highly-educated women with paid jobs and the less educated women with part-time jobs in informal sectors; and the gap between the number of women with tertiary education and the number of those who had a related job (Kian, 2014).

The unemployment of women is caused by tradition/moral causes, by the lack of decision-making positions—which college-educated women should hold—, the structural economic crisis, and the informal sector—which is not taken into consideration by official statistics—. Women that work in the informal sector (as tailors, hairdressers, housekeepers, etc.) usually have no contracts nor social security benefits. Many women also work for their family businesses with no pay at all. In 2014, it was estimated that the number of women doing unpaid labour was more than 5,5 million (Kian, 2014).

Michael Ross (2008) explains that capital intense industries such as the petroleum industry in Iran, are less capable of creating job position and improving labour in a generation. Ross uses the theory of the Dutch Disease¹⁹ to explain why the revenues from the oil sector are making the agriculture and manufacturing sectors less and less relevant.

Recent data from 2019 shows that women represent 19% of the total labour force of Iran, compared to 81% of men, exhibiting consistent employment inequalities across the decades (World Bank Open Data, 2020). Even more alarming is the data presented by the official ISNA News Agency (2018), which stated that 80% of working women do not have insurance, work between 10 and 12 hours per day and receive an average monthly salary of 400,000 rials—less than 8 euro.

¹⁹ Dutch disease is an economic concept to explain that the fast development of the sector of natural resources causes the heavy decline of the rest of the sectors. It also causes heavy depreciation of the national currency.

3.3.2 Education

The study of the role of women in education is relevant, and it is especially so because of our belief that education should be the engine of feminism, to empower women in all parts of the planet.

Women education has faced ups and downs since 1979. During the first three years of the Revolution, most educational centres and universities remained closed, and women were restricted to stay at home. Then, under the guidance of Khomeini, education reopened with several restrictions in terms of election of majors—for instance women were not allowed to study veterinary or geology—, quotas of females—to make sure they would not dominate any science subject—, single women would not be granted scholarships to study abroad, and married women should be accompanied by their husbands (Mehran, 2003).

In the first decade after the Revolution, there were some improvements in education but they were rapidly rejected by President Rafsanjani. Following the death of Khomeini, some advances occurred in 1993, removing the quotas and bans on particular fields. Khatami²⁰'s presidential period was characterized by female enrolment in tertiary education. By 2001, single women were again allowed to use scholarships to travel abroad. However, the number of women accepted in full-time jobs was 17.3% (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011).

The era of Ahmadinejad eroded many of the signs of progress made, calling for the de-feminization and Islamization of education, restoring the quotas, the limitations by subject, and imposing gender segregation and favouring of female local universities instead of urban universities to reduce mobility. Gender segregation included the use of different textbooks and education methods depending on the “necessities” of each sex and eliminated traces of western methods or teachings (Kousha, 1992).

²⁰ Mohammad Khatami was the fifth president of Iran. He was more moderate than others Presidents and heavily criticized his successor President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, advocating for freedom and democracy, although not very successful on any of them.

Moreover in 2012, 70 more courses were banned for women and some universities prohibited the attendance of women claiming that female engineers or scientist would end jobless. Rouhani, the current Presidency was expected to improve the situation but hopes never turned into reality and there are no dramatic changes (Kian, 2014).

To look at the brighter side, women literacy has improved since the Revolution, as the government invested heavily in schools, especially in rural areas where it was more needed. From only 52% of girls enrolled in primary school, by 2002 they increased to 91% (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006). By the same year, the number of girls and boys enrolled in secondary education was almost equivalent and the literacy rate of adult women reached 96% in 2020 (Literacy Movement Organization, 2020).

Many educated rural women left their houses to pursue higher education in the cities, changing the demographic tendencies of the country, lowering income inequalities, raising literacy, and declining infant mortality and fertility rates (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006).

The brilliant fieldwork of Azadeh Kian from 1994 to 2008 shows how there is a correlation between women's level of education and economic independence and their ability to marry and divorce. In their survey, of almost 8,000 women, 77% were in favour of equal gender access to work (Kian, 2014).

Kian's (2014: 342) research also shows that college-educated and employed Iranian women had exogamous marriages based on free choice. Employed women would participate actively in the decision-making, while no-income earning women would "let [the husband] make all decisions alone because he earns our living, is older and has more experience" as one of the interviewed women added.

The power of education is shown in the mentality of women as well. Of all the surveyed women, 30% thought that housework was the responsibility of the

woman only. But only 19% of literate women 5% of college-educated women agreed (Kian, 2014: 345).

3.3.3 *Civil and Social Rights*

In this detailed study of the situation of Feminism in Iran, comprehensive knowledge of the real situation of women is essential. Beyond religious texts and judicial interpretations, we must study the specific status of women in their personal life, and how it affects the existing legal system. This section on Civil and Social Rights aims to bring us closer to the daily situation of women in Iran, beyond the abstract theoretical world that is reflected in the literature. We have included in this part, a series of issues that, due to their special peculiarity from our Western perspective or because of their real interest in the daily life of women, seem especially significant.

Thus, we will focus this study of Civil and Social Rights on seven aspects: marriage, divorce —independently due to their special configuration—, motherhood, space segregation, dress codes —and, obviously, the veil—, freedom of expression and areas of solidarity. Perhaps some may seem trivial, but only after individualized study, we can obtain the vision of their world, which allows us to understand their real situation, their life and their hopes.

3.3.3.1 *Marriage*

The Marriage institution is seen as an honourable way to transform men sexual impulses into family strength and patriotic construction. Also, it is seen as a practical tool to ensure their alluring and prized daughters are controlled by a strong and powerful husband (Afshar, 1985).

Seems to be quite ironic, that women, who are represented as modest angelic creatures are supposed to leave all their most valuable traits apart and “when alone with their husband take off their garments and exhibit all their beauty” (Afshar, 1985: 271).

The Family Courts rule over the possibility of polygamy, but they seem to be concerned only by the financial ability²¹ of the husband to maintain several wives instead of the wives' opinion, or the social, moral and psychological consequences. When men marry several widows is seen as an act of generosity and honourability towards these women and towards the Republic. However, in reality, polygamy seems not to provide any support for women, but rather to keep replacing them (Kian, 2014).

Only a few months after the end of the revolution, by October 1979, men could have four permanent wives and innumerable temporary wives, and men had the exclusive right of divorce. The age of marriage lowered to 13 and men have the authority to ban their wives from getting paid employment if the job could bring dishonour—in practice, it can be any job from belly dancing to teaching languages. (Keddie, 1980).

Men can marry innumerable temporary wives with the practice of *sigheh*, which does not need court approval and men are not obliged to provide to their wives, although the children are entitled to full inheritance. In 2012, the article regarding *sigheh* was amended, and now temporary marriages need registration if pregnancy is involved. On the contrary, women can only be married to one man at a time and should leave *iddah*²² between marriages (Afshar, Women, State and Ideology in Iran, 1985) (Kian, 2014).

There is a customary practice for men to marry much younger women, which is not a specific phenomenon of Iran or Middle-East countries but a general trend among countries with high inequalities. As rural areas are marginalized, the data is very biased (Kian, 2014).

²¹ Although there is not a specific requirement of financial resources.

²² *Iddah* (in Arabic) is the time women must wait before remarrying. The average time is a three-month period after divorce (there is no *iddah* if the marriage was not consummated); four lunar months and ten days if the husband died; and until she gives birth if she was pregnant while widowed or divorced.

In rural areas, many women are married when they are younger than 16 years old, although it is worth mentioning that the per cent of the population living in rural areas is decreasing year by year. Early marriage is specifically problematic in the poorest province of Iran, Sistan/Baluchestan²³. Minors are married to elder men, sometimes to pay family debts or to improve their socio-economic status (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006).

However, the average age of marriage for women followed a positive trend since the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi dynasty, who increased the legal minimum to 18 and 20 for women and men respectively. Although the Revolution lowered the age to 13, the real average age is slowly increasing, especially in urban areas, reaching 23.4 years old in 2002. However, in the poorest areas of Sistan/Baluchestan, the average age is only 16²⁴ (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006).

There is a two million imbalance between the number of women in age-to-be-married and the number of men, and Iran is facing a demographic crisis and women are suffering the consequences. The decreasing number of males has been provoked by a massive migration of highly-skilled men seeking better jobs and career opportunities abroad, and, as a consequence, women are left out with a very limited choosing range, especially of educated men (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006).

There has been a severe increase in the number of single women in Iran. There has been an increase of 13 percentual points (pp) of never-married women in Iran from 1966 to 2002. Some authors such as Rokasna Bahramitash and Shahla Kazemipour (2006), considered this tendency positive for women development. However, it is crucial to remember that there are many more women than men

²³ Sistan and Baluchestan is the second largest province of Iran, located in the southeast of the country, bordering the West of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The population is less than 3 million and their Human Developed Index of the region is 0.688 (while, for reference, the province of Teheran has an HDI of 0.834).

²⁴ In practice, the average age of marriage for women in rural areas might be quite lower as villagers do not necessarily register marriages, and no courts or civil institutions can determine the age and the right of the brides.

and that arranged marriages are declining, so the figures do not necessarily represent the free election of women, but demographics.

3.3.3.2 *Divorce*

Within the normative legal framework of the norms that regulate family law, we are going to specifically study divorce, due to its special connotations, and very harsh restrictions, from our Western perspective.

The Quranic rulings over marriage and divorce should be understood in the historical context. For instance, the permission to have four wives is based on the necessity of Muhammad war times to protect widows and orphans and depends fully on the capability to treat them all evenly. However, in the next *surah*²⁵, the Quran reflect on the practical impossibility to treat wives equally. Many modernists understand this as a prohibition of polygamy, while traditionalists find a justification of it (Keddie, 1980).

Regarding divorces, in 2001, around 10% of marriages ended in divorce (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006). Again, even if this figure might seem positive, we have to remember that divorce is normally a men's right and that the divorce rate of high-equality countries is much higher, for instance, Spain rate that same year was almost 60% and France and Italy around 50% (Eurostat, 2021).

Data collected in 2002 shows that only one-fifth of married couples had a friendship before marriage, which shows, that, even if arranged marriages declined, their choices are still very much based on others advice or assumptions. The same research shows that 55.6% of women claim to follow their parents' advice when choosing a partner (Bahramitash & Kazemipour, 2006).

²⁵ *Surah* is a "chapter" of the Quran. The Quran is divided into 114 *surahs* of variable length, from a few verses, or *ayahs*, to hundreds of them.

Women can actually initiate the legal procedure of divorcing based on three customary premises: male impotence, male sterility²⁶, desertion²⁷. On the other hand, men can divorce women in the presence of other men without informing their wife (Afshar, 1985).

Regarding the women we had the opportunity to dialogue, only one was married to an Iranian man (*Woman #1*). When we asked about this topic, she explained that divorces are “more problematic (...) in low-level families who do not let the women divorce”. In Iran legal system, the financial independence of women is brutal, and especially needed families cannot afford to maintain a daughter.

When divorcing, men are obliged to pay *mehrieh*²⁸ to their wife. The amount is negotiated prior to the wedding, and it is usually in the form of gold coins, silver and properties. Although women can renounce *mehrieh*, the amount can be also very high. Consequently, many men do not want the expensive process of divorcing, forcing themselves and their wives into unhappy marriages.

The inequality between genders in divorce matters is perceived by women in Iran, and all the women we have spoken with stated that they would include several clauses in their marriage contracts to ensure their civil and social rights. In the case of *Woman #1*, she asked her husband to “vow” on the equal right of divorce. It was interesting to notice that he expressed this vow as a favour that her father did, quoting her: “my dad cares about me so much that in the paragraph says I can divorce my husband without any specific reason”.

²⁶ Male sterility requires medical evidence and a five-year trial period to confirm the inability to procreate.

²⁷ Desertion may include lack of maintenance (economic support), an incurable disease, strong addictions, more than five years' imprisonment. But it is not ultimately clear as the *Family Protection Law* has been reintroduced only partially and most of the acts still under consideration.

²⁸ *Mehrieh* is a form of pre-nuptial agreement where the husband has to pay the wife if he wants to divorce. If they refuse, the punishment in jail. It is common to pay the same amount of gold coins to the birth year of the women. So, if she was born in 1379 (in Jalali calendar, the year 2000 in Gregorian calendar), he would pay that number of gold coins to her.

It is noteworthy that only a few resources on women rights in Iran include the travel rights of women. Nowadays in Iran, married women need permission from their husband to travel abroad, and he has the authority to renew (or not) the passport of the wife. This can be amended with a contractual clause when married, as *Woman #1* did, allowing travelling without permission.

3.3.3.3 *Maternity and Children Custody*

We close the world around the family, with the study of the conditions that surround women motherhood.

In 2010, Ahmadinejad²⁹ stated that Iran needed a 30% rise in population, backed by Ali Khamenei, that believed the Iranian population should rise to 150 million—for reference, the Iranian population in 2010 was less than 74 million. (Kian, 2014).

Iran, and the Middle East and North African (MENA) region in general, have managed to lower their fertility rate during the past years. *Fatwas*³⁰ in favour of modern contraception and reproductive healthcare have improved the rates (Haghighat, 2014).

Immediately after the revolution, in 1979, the “domesticity” of women encouraged the pro-natalist ideology, discouraging contraceptives and banning abortion. In 1979, the fertility rate in Iran was 6.42, placing the country among the fastest-growers in the region (Haghighat, 2014). However, due to the influence of religious leaders, the rate decreased slowly, reaching 4.69 in 1990, 2.07 in 2000, 1.84 in 2010 and stabilizing around 2 in 2018 (Our World in Data, 2020).

²⁹ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad served as the sixth president of Iran, succeeded by the current president Hassan Rouhani. He is known for being the least popular political figure in Iran and has been accused of corruption and nepotism.

³⁰ *Fatwa* is a religious ruling in Islam. Their topics can range from healthcare and wildlife trade to nuclear activities and terrorism.

3.3.3.4 Sex Segregation

As we have already noted, some of the facets on which we focus the study of women's civil rights in Iran could appear unusual. But we consider that its study, especially from our perspective, is essential for this comprehensive knowledge that we pursue, making it teleologically essential.

Gendered space is a common predetermination of Muslim societies and countries ruled by *Shariah Law*³¹. Although some scholars like Judith Tucker (2008) claim that gender segregation is not an inherited feature of the traditional legal Islamic discourse.

The sex segregation introduced by the Shah created huge challenges for Iran. One of them was the ratio of female doctors and female patients. The Islamic doctrine would disapprove of men taking their wives to male doctors, but the number of female doctors was inconsequential (Kousha, 1992).

Space shapes the social life, structures and relationships among individuals in a society. Spaces are often designed to satisfy the necessities of society and reflect the imperative ideology and values of such. Although many scholars focus on sex segregation and gendered spaces, it is worth mentioning that social spaces are also divided by other characteristics such as class and background (Sawalha, 2014).

3.3.3.5 Dress Code and Veil

We are now entering another aspect of social life: women's clothing and the meaning that it acquires when transmitting values of special importance.

One of the first doctrines of the Republic was to reinstate the veil or *hijab*³², to differentiate the revolutionary women from the "corrupt". Although many women

³¹ *Sharia Law, Shariah Law or Islamic Law* is the religious law that derives from the Quran and Sunnah, with immutable and divine character, meaning that is not humanly interpreted.

³² *Hijab* is the religious veil wore by many Muslim women in public spaces or the presence of men outside of the immediate family. It usually covers the hair, head and chest. In Iran is compulsory to wear a *hijab* since the Revolution, and they should be covering everything but their face and

manifested and demonstrated their opposition to the dress code, by 1982 every single woman would cover her head in Iran. Refusing to wear the veil in public was an illegal act and they could not enter stores, shops or offices or using any form of public or private transport (Kousha, 1992: 30).

Women have been forced to be the very own symbol of family honour, modesty and Iranian values; thus, they are constantly limited and paternalistic controlled by men to ensure the honourability of the household. Haleh Afshar (1985) argues that the revolution had deprived women of many civil and social rights and essential freedoms, transforming them into privatized objects of their husbands.

Not only the pride of the family depends on women's "decency", but also the scrupulousness of the Republic (Tucker, 2008). There have been cases of women, that were covering "inadequately", being attacked by men armed with white weapons and guns (Afshar, 1985: 265).

The justification of the veil is not based on women, but men. Men are described as very weak and primitive creatures with virtually non-existent self-control (Zaneh Rouz, 1984). The physical presence of women is said to challenge men rationality. Therefore, women should wear the veil to "eradicate both adultery and sodomy" (Afshar, 1985: 266).

In the words of Mehri Honarbin-Hollyday (2010: 54-55), "the dress code is currently a significant tool to make a collective and symbolic statement, and a means for being a highly visible front in society, declaring identities and social capital." When we talk about dress code or veiling the reflection that we have to make goes far beyond the simple "imposition on women's body"; we should also reflect on the direct consequences of these obligations on identity, communication and relationships.

Nowadays, people are obliged to wear a mask and we are all aware of how this has worsened our communication capabilities, ability to recognize people or

hands. However, the reality is that there is a degree of flexibility, as the women asked for this paper argued, that they wear it very "casually" without covering their hair or neck completely.

capacity of socializing and understanding emotions. Covering limits drastically how women can interact with others and with the world.

As the women interviews for this paper seem to agree, dress code established evident differences between men and women, but it also shows the differences among women. Rural older women wear chadors and urban wealthier women wear luxury-branded scarfs as *hijab*. Dress code is the most obvious signifier of cultural background, economic privileges, residence and ideology (Honarbin-Holliday, 2010).

3.3.3.6 Freedom of Speech

We will focus the study of this right to freedom of expression in two specific stages: the press and blogs.

The winter volume of 1989 of the *Women's Assembly of the Republic of Iran* (a government-supported journal) started with "Why haven't women achieve their true status in Iran?". Other independent journals have considered on their page's topics such as women rights (Kousha, 1992: 35).

However, most of the press was very aligned with the government ideology, the weekly women's magazine, *Zaneh Rouz* (1984) often highlighted the importance of marriage as the solution to solve each of the problems of young women. The magazine even compared unmarried women to terrorist, claiming that they are "vulnerable to false ideas [that] (...) led them to murder and treason" (Afshar, 1985: 260).

In 1992, the *Islamic Propagation of Qom Seminaries* produces several journals for women, but there is no women presence in their editorial board. When the researcher Mir-Hosseini asked them: "no women that I know will not be hurt if her husband takes another woman (...) then, how can we say that *shariah* rulings about polygamy (..) are in harmony with women's nature (...) I speak as a woman, how can you men know what I feel?" (Mir-Hosseini, 1998: 52).

During the interview, the question was avoided and all the civil (lack of) rights were justified on the “different nature of women” and for the “own protection”. Many of the magazines have a very moral conception of shariah law, instead of a legalistic view that can be far more aligned with feminist ideas and progress towards equality (Mir-Hosseini, 1998).

The *Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University* has demonstrated the importance of the political blogosphere to open dialogue, democratizing institutions and creating social networks in oppressive countries. The blogs and other forms of social media in Iran are playing a very important role in the expansion of grass-root movements to regional and global level initiatives.

However, in the case of Iran, only 24% of the bloggers are female. Niki Akhavan (2011) shows that the opinions of low-class women are not reflected on social media as they do not have the resources to do so. The technological gap between low-class and high-class women can be added to the list of political, economic and sociocultural differences (Haghighat, 2014).

Kelly and Etling (2008) divide the Iran blogosphere into four levels: the reformist (1), the conservative (2), the artistic (3) and the mixed (4). And their study shows that the government is not actively targeting secular or reformist publications (1). Contrary to the public physical space that is highly monitored and legislated; the virtual realm seems to be an open space to discuss the rigidity or the injustices of the regime (Haghighat, 2014).

3.3.3.7 *Spaces of Solidarity*

Finally, we will approach the world of feminism from the fields of self-help and solidarity to give the last “twist” to the study of the situation of women in Iran.

Self-help initiatives are described can be described as the activities of organizations in the sector of non-profit, voluntary, mutual benefit associations, organizations and other cooperatives of similar nature (Le'vesque & Mendel, 2005).

Khomeini proposed several *jihads*³³, against illiteracy, for healthcare, education and housing among others. Crowds of women were mobilized to volunteer in this state-sponsored campaigns, uniting middle and low-class women from both, rural and urban areas (Bahramitash R. , 2014).

Bahramitash (2013) interviewed almost 50 low-income Islamic women in Iran in 2014, and most of them were either givers or receivers of social help in the form of informal Islamic charity³⁴. The informal help encompassed grass-root self-help groups, institutions with semi-formal status, self-help rotating services and credit associations (ROSCAs) and others. Women have created their own ROSCAs with self-help purposes, and for instance, the neediest women of the association would “win the lottery” so they could be supported without all the negative social implications of “receiving charity”.

The fieldwork of Bahramitash (2014, pp. 366-375) also shows the massive social safety network of Iran that relies on women, formal and informally. Female solidarity may erase the class differences between women, but can also emphasise their differences. The money flow of rich and educated to the poor perpetuates the differences. The givers are generous and modern, willing to help; and the receivers are the traditionalist in need. The solidarity economy is a short-term solution but structural changes need to be made to address generational poverty.

On a positive note, some movements, based on collaboration rather than solidarity promote long term solutions and structural improvements. For instance, women from all classes joined against the demolition of shanties where the urban population reallocated after the draughts. But it is very hard to imagine that

³³ *Jihad* means “struggle” and has religious implications. Although the western press often uses the term *jihad* as a synonym of holy war it does not have any military or violent connotations *per se*, for instance, becoming a better person is a type of non-violent *jihad*.

³⁴ According to Islam, there are different types of charity. *Zakat* is a compulsory fixed amount that should be paid once a year to any needed cause. *Sadaqah* is voluntary and the periodicity and amount depends on the benefactor, it does not only include money but also goods, the help of any act of kindness.

economic solidarity will develop enough to overcome the challenges and transform Iran socially, politically or economically (Haghighat-Sordellini, 2011)

4. CONCLUSIONS

We can draw several conclusions after the reading of this research. Many of them are irrefutable and we have already anticipated them: the Iranian revolution meant a setback in the situation of women. But also, other conclusions, allow us to glimpse halos of hope.

After clarifying the main political and social characteristics of Pre-revolutionary Iran and its impact on women, we can observe that, although women were inequal and unempowered, the westernisation of the public realm granted them some freedoms; and the legislative reforms, especially during the last decade of the Pahlavi Dynasty, improved their domestic conditions and their civil rights.

We highlighted the importance of the Islamic Revolution and its impact on gender dynamics, explaining how they advocated for traditional Islamic values and anti-westernisation. As a consequence, many of the advances on rights and freedoms of the Pre-revolutionary period were erased, and women returned to “domesticity”.

The women of Iran have undergone the consequences of the change of paradigm that the Revolution conveyed. They have been considered second-class citizens, with the only exception of the right to vote. In all the other aspects of political, economic or social rights they are considered inferior to their brothers, fathers, and especially husbands. Men are the absolute sovereigns of their wives—with the power to decide if they work or not, if they study or not, if they can travel or not, if they can divorce or not, etc.

Three determinant factors have shaped—and are shaping—the status of women in Iran: education, labour and social and civil rights. From these factors, we can determine which are the key ones that should be addressed to advance towards a higher degree of equality and women empowerment.

Education should be a tool and that grants access to the “public level” of empowerment, meaning the *labour* market. However, while the advances in literacy and education are impressive and historically unprecedented, they have not been translated into more or better job opportunities, neither higher social status. Many highly qualified women are jobless, reducing their empowerment capabilities and autonomy severely.

High levels of *education* do provide better marriages for women —of higher status or out of free choice— and it will likely improve the decision-making and the power relations within the house, improving their status within the domestic realm. However, women empowerment does not aim at the “domestic” level, but at the “public” sphere.

Women access to employment is not only beneficial for their empowerment but also, women’s paid labour can actively grow the economy. Women are working in informal and unregulated sectors such as elderly or children care, but regulating those markets and professions would benefit the whole society and creating jobs and economic welfare. Ending with unpaid labour —either by family members or external individuals— would be the first step to address inequalities.

Civil and social rights also show the inequalities between genders and highlight the underlying consideration of women as inferior. This can be shown in the differences of rights in terms of marriage, divorce, child custody, sex segregation, dress code, freedom of speech and solidarity; where men have more favourable rights and freedoms compared to women that are limited to the will of the men.

Another finding of this research is the *inequality within women*, especially regarding income levels and the geographic area. Low-income rural women should be defended as, due to the lack of higher education, the job offer would be less attractive. Together with income level, other factors, such as age and civil status, affect the capacity of women to take an active role in the labour market, and to ensure women empowerment, they should take part in the economy and the public sphere.

In general, rural women oppose modernism, while urban women oppose traditionalism. A solution for this conceptual problem can be already found in the shift of discourse from “reformism” to a discourse based on (women) “rights”. With the discourse of “rights”, Iranian women can also advocate for more equal and just *civil and social rights*, which could improve the social conditions of those women that not have access to *education* or *jobs*.

All in all, as we have already advanced throughout the exposition of this research, *education* should be the basis of the progress towards equality. This education will be the one that encourages and allows women to achieve their rightful role in society. *Labour* is the most important variable that needs to be primarily addressed, as it is unmistakably lacking the potency needed to ensure *equality*. It is employment, and the access of women to the world of labour in its entirety, the most effective mean to bring real equality closer to Iranian society, backed by education and achieving advances in major civil and social rights.

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