From Marxist Organizations to Feminism
Iranian Women's Experiences of Revolution and Exile

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Iranian women were extremely active during the revolution of 1979. They were or became active within various political organizations and fought for democracy and freedom. The focus of this paper is on the activities of a group of Iranian women leftists within Marxist organizations in Iran and their experiences in exile. These political activists had to leave Iran when it became a crime to be a Marxist. During their activities in Iran, their Marxist convictions limited the ways in which they dealt with issues such as gender, sexuality, and women's rights. However the fact that they became so active made them potentially aware of their rights as women. It was later when this potential knowledge became manifest. These women who initially underestimated women's questions and suppressed their womanhood in the framework of Marxist ideology, became strong advocates of women's rights and serious contributors in the women's movement when they were in exile.

As a 13 year-old girl growing up in a secular family in Iran in 1975, I never thought of becoming either a Marxist or a Feminist. About three years later, some months before the revolution of 1979, I became a passionate follower of a Marxist-Leninist organization and was ready to sacrifice my life for the Marxist ideology. In that period, the feminist movement appeared to me as a waste of time. I believed that women's problems would be solved as soon as a classless society was established. So why waste time changing the condition of women when one could invest in changing the whole society? It took years of suppression as a woman by the Iranian Islamic regime and some years of life in exile in the Netherlands for me to realize that the fight for

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improvements in the condition of women could not be postponed for any reason at all. It was then that I realized that the women's movement needed to be taken seriously in its own right. I was not alone in this change of idea. Many women activists of the Iranian revolution have similar experiences of the past and the present. This became a part of my research later on.

My past experiences have been essential in the choice of my study in anthropology and later in my choice of research on the experiences of Iranian women leftist political activists first in Iran and later in exile. This paper is based on part of the research I completed between 1995 and 2000. For this research I listened to the life stories of these women exiles in the Netherlands and the United States –in California, mainly in Los Angeles. The Iranian women I interviewed were active participants in the Iranian revolution of 1979 and had to leave Iran when the years of suppression started in 1981. In each country I interviewed twenty women and asked them about their past experiences as leftist activists and their present life as exiles. One of the points of the focus of the research was on the impact of the political ideas on gender identity and the ways that this impact changed over time. This is the part I will present in this piece.

When politics became everything

The involvement of women in the Iranian revolution of 1979 took place at many different levels. Their most intense participation was during the two years after the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime which lasted from1926–1979. During 1979–1981, which was called 'the spring of freedom', a number of political groups came into existence that at that time were permitted by law. These groups advanced a wide range of ideologies, including forms of Marxism, Islamism, liberalism, and women's rights. Both the extent of the freedom enjoyed during these years and the opportunity for political involvement gave Iranian women the chance to become part of the political change in their country on an extensive level for the first time.

After the revolution, scenes in the streets changed drastically, especially in front of the University of Teheran. Bookshops were filled with new books previously illegal. In front of these shops, stands displayed newly printed books, tapes of revolutionary music, and a multitude of newspapers from diverse political groups. In front of almost every stand a group of people discussed political issues and plans for the future of the country. Men and woman of all ages and classes took part in passionate debates. Interest in politics at that time dominated all other differences; the only difference that mat-

tered was political. Nahid[1], who lives in the United States, emphasized this point clearly: "My sister told me once: "History has given us an intensive course," and she was right. When I look back, I see that the intensity of the events then was so great that you felt as if those events happened in thirty years: those years were so intense. Those were great years, and I always look forward to having another time like that."

Those years felt like an open university both on a theoretical and practical level for many women, as some explicitly mentioned. However, this does not mean that they see their political activities of those years as based on conscious political choices. Sara, who was around seventeen years old during the revolution and now lives in the Netherlands, recalled those years in the following way: "I think that I learned a lot then. I was thirsty for knowledge and I learned many things. It was as if I ate the books: I did not just read them, believe me. Most of the things I studied were in that period. I still make use of my stockpile of knowledge from that period. The knowledge of those years was so intense that I can still use it now. I think to myself, how can two or three years affect people so much, especially our generation that was in between. [...] I learned a lot from those years, but everything then was out of proportion. I mean in the political way. What we read was very good: why not? But unfortunately the political aspect was more emotional and came from excitement. But it was a great time; I will never forget that period. I wish the same kind of period for my child, but with a happier ending."

Minoo, who was then twenty years old, now an artist living in the Netherlands, related her feelings: "The most wonderful thing, which I will never forget, and to which I always long to return, was the possibility for discussion between people. [...] I had never seen so many people, so much discussion, everybody debating different issues. Lots of new books and films came onto the market then. [...] Politics became a part of the life of all levels of society. Everybody had the right to express herself or himself, even traditional people.... I witnessed the most wonderful, historical changes. Nobody — the organizations, the Shah, and even the West — expected that people would go so far. All of them were shocked, including us. [...] The discussions continued day and night, one quoting Lenin, another quoting Ali. [...] I never had seen so many people, so many discussions; everybody debated about different issues. [...] I was proud of that, I felt respect towards myself, and this respect was also because of some improvements for women in that period. The fact that these changes were limited afterwards is a different story. I had a very special feeling because of this respect and it also shaped my character at that time. I think that lots of people had that. It caused a very

strong self-confidence, especially in that age of being a young adult. I was thinking that I had found my way of life so clearly, and I could see that women are able to do things."

Nahid, a nineteen-year old during the revolution, now living in the U.S., felt similarly. For her those years felt like paradise: "I can say that those years were the better years of my life. I think that I never in my life enjoyed life like that. I gained a lot of personal freedom at that time and socially all those restrictions were not there any more. You could go wherever you wanted to go, you could do whatever you wanted to do. It was a really safe environment and a democratic one. It was friendly and everything was good. It was as if it was paradise; *that was my paradise anyway*. Those were the best years of my life. I think that it was not for nothing that millions of people were active with so much passion and honesty during that time. That atmosphere gave you so much energy. I slept just four hours at night, but I did not feel tired at all. I had so much energy that it covered everything. *But it did not last long.* [emphasis added]"

For Samira, a nineteen-year old then, now living in the Netherlands, the most important aspect of those years was that her political activism after the revolution gave her a strong sense of self-confidence. This point was also mentioned by Minoo. "I felt for the first time that I was someone. I was always studying but when I became a member of a political organization, I was satisfied with the fact that I was someone. I was then 19 years old. Before that I was not responsible for anything, but all of a sudden I became a person who was in charge of some people and there was a person who was in charge of me. Life became different; it was really satisfy-ing for me. I really enjoyed it when I went to demonstrations. This feeling of joy is maybe what I feel now, but at that time I felt that I was doing something. I did not have to stay at home and wait until someone entered the door. It was really like that, before I became politically active."

To be a woman: Gender and politics

Those highly politicized years had a complex influence on gender relations. On the social level, those years gave women greatly increased social possibilities and mobility. Women from various strata of society participated in social and political events. Despite the extended space created in those years, public participation was not new for all women. Many from the higher classes were already involved in the public domain and had held various positions before the revolution. These women too, however, experienced an increase of their social mobility. For the first time in decades, women from all levels of society were present in public. Neda talks about this de-

velopment: “During the time of the Shah I saw that some possibilities existed for women, but only for women from the higher class. This changed. You felt that even women from lower classes who were not educated had a voice, too. You were doing the same things. [...] This was a feeling that I never had during the time of the Shah. In those years, you saw one or two girls from the lower classes at the university. It was really rare, but you could see that there were some possibilities, just not for all women. There was some freedom, but not for all women. In those years, because they wanted to involve everyone in the revolution, they gave some room even to the girls and women always limited by their traditional and religious families. When religious pressures from inside the families wanted to keep them at home, religious leaders and social changes took them outside into society. So they also felt the freedom, and I was happy that a girl who was never allowed to leave her house was then next to me in a demonstration. It was a great feeling. I think that this is still there in Iran. This transformation happened during the revolution and they could not change it. This was one of the positive aspects of the revolution. The women and girls of the lower classes were pulled into the society.”

Taraneh was nineteen years old then and is now living in the Netherlands. She told me that she never felt that her parents treated her differently because she was a girl. She was free to do many things and was amazed that her other girlfriends did not have the same freedom. In spite of her freedom as a girl, she still felt some changes regarding the position of women. “Before the revolution, even during intellectual gatherings, when there was a discussion, men went and discussed. I remember that when I socialized with them, my mother always said: “She is attached to men.” I replied then that in those gatherings interesting things happened, and I wanted to be there. Through their discussions I could hear things about the outside world. But after the revolution, it was so nice that people of both sexes discussed things with each other on the streets. This old traditional system changed drastically, and this caused lots of problems. I saw many women and men who got divorced in those years. Many had marital conflicts; for example, a man who used to be the god of the house in the old system lost that. Those things changed drastically in a short period of time.”

There were some differences in the way the impact on women was narrated by the women I interviewed, but what they agreed on was that the space of extensive social activities empowered women enormously during the revolution. This empowerment can be seen as a first step that potentially affected women’s consciousness of their rights. However, this potential space created for women to expand their traditional

boundaries did not lead to an actual improvement of women's rights in those years. There are two main factors that can explain this process.

First, not long after the revolution, religious leaders started to limit women's social mobility and abolish those rights in favor of women (I will come back to this later). Second, the highly politicized society led to the marginalization and temporary denial of women's issues. The dominant political identity overshadowed gender differences and sexual relationships. Within Marxist organizations, the question of women's rights was considered something that had to be solved after the victory of political struggle, or the victory of socialism. This led to the situation in which independent women's activities or organizations were not supported by political organizations. The marginalization of women's issues within Marxist organizations in Iran is related to the historically difficult relationship between feminism and socialism in general. "Feminists have criticized leftists for their lack of attention to sexual domination, and many socialists, in turn, have looked at women's liberation movements as a bourgeois deviation or, worse yet, a conspiracy against the workers' struggle" (Shahidian 1994, 223).

Minoo's story illustrates this contradictory aspect of empowerment and denial of the situation of women. "In those years there was respect for women, and they could do many things. It was like that even in religious organizations. The contacts between men and women became intensified, and this was something we did not have before this time. [...] But in those years everybody's identity was in the name of their organizations. At that time, I was only thinking of how to develop my self-defensive and revolutionary methods, instead of thinking of having children or not."

On the individual level we see the same kind of contradiction between the empowerment and the denial of gender within the leftist organizations. On the one hand, the intense mixed-gender political activities brought both sexes together on a large scale. Almost all the activities within the leftist organizations were mixed-gender, with both sexes journeying to the mountains for several days. For some women who did not have such contacts with the other sex in an intense way these activities constituted a rather confusing phase in their life. In those years these sexually mixed activities could not be condemned easily, because they were desexualized under a political label. In this sense we see that desexualization both empowered women to interact with the other sex, but also led to the denial of their womanhood. Samira articulates the conflict of being in close contact with the opposite sex: "It was very difficult for me. I was brought up in a way that — for example my aunt had a son who was two years older than I was,

and we always had to keep our distance. But when I became politically active we had mixed meetings in our organization. I did not feel comfortable. Lots of traditional thoughts were still there. Even if they were talking about equal rights, tradition was still intact. I was brought up with that culture. It was true that we had meetings and discussed different matters, but that was very difficult, even for the boys. I remember that when there was a meeting and I was alone with a boy we both felt uncomfortable. I think that boys were even more uncomfortable. [...] In the mountains I did not talk to everybody. It was difficult, I had lots of limitations, and for myself I did not feel comfortable."

Few of the women expressed themselves in this matter. Most of them did not mention this feeling of discomfort. In order to understand the differences in this regard several factors are of importance. First, for women coming from traditional or religious families, the mixed experiences with the other sex were more limited than they were for women from secular and less traditional families. Second, age is also another important factor. Women who were older than twenty during that time had been students of the universities and had co-educational classes and activities prior to the revolution. This was not the case for high school students, because the vast majority of high schools in Iran were gender-segregated even before the revolution. Third, whether a woman had lived in a small city or in Tehran was also important. Most of the women who had lived in Tehran and were from secular families had mixed-gender activities even during their high school years. They went to mixed-gender parties and had boyfriends during the time of the Shah. In spite of the differences[2], the amount of interaction between the sexes and its intensity had increased for almost all the women I interviewed. Nevertheless, this newly intensified contact with the other sex for these women went together with the denial of their womanhood and their sexuality. I will elaborate on both aspects here.

Womanhood denied

In terms of denial of womanhood, the ideal revolutionary type was a very masculine figure. Women within leftist political organizations felt they had to live up to this ideal to show that they were real revolutionaries. Sayeh, then an eighteen-year old, speaks of this aspect, stressed in the stories of mountain climbing: "I did not feel that the men of the organization looked at me as a woman. I think that some differences were there: if you consider the physical aspect that women are weaker, it is so. The exception would be when an athletic woman is compared to a normal man. At that time there was a desire for

equality. In the mountains I carried a 40-kilo backpack intended for a boy 1.8 meters in height. Later I had pain in my back for weeks. When I look back, I see that these kinds of things were wrong. I still have problems with my back after so many years."

Samira mentions the same point: "It was really strange, you know, in the mountains, we as girls were supposed to carry the same heavy backpacks as boys. It was really exaggerated. I remember once I got a back pain for a week because of carrying a heavy backpack the whole day. I really liked it then, but all that pain was unbelievable."

To bear all that pain or physical harshness to become more like a man was one denial of womanhood. Another was that women were not supposed to look attractive by wearing makeup or nice dresses. Any act that would have been considered womanly was condemned and seen as a deviation from the norm. "Another practical consequence of the left's approach to the 'woman question' was the de-sexing of woman, clearly visible in the baggy clothes and absence of cosmetics among female revolutionary activists" (Shahidian 1994, 234).

In the denial of their sexuality, women talked about the various ways they suppressed their sexual attraction to the other sex as one of the sacrifices they were supposed to make. If any attention was given to love and marriage, it was for 'proletarian love and marriage' based on common political analysis and advocacy. Peykar [one of the large leftist organizations then-HG] issued an internal guideline on how members and supporters should choose their mates (Shahidian 1994, 233).

Moghissi also highlights this issue:"Most veteran Fedayeen [the large leftist guerilla organization of that time-HG] refrained from love/marriage relationships, which they thought would impede their devotion to revolutionary activities. Not coincidentally, there was an extraordinary upsurge in the rate of marriage among ex-political prisoners after the revolution, and many others who had refrained from having children started families. In fact, an organizational recommendation was issued to this effect and nearly all the Fedaii cadres married after the revolution. [...] In essence, they were arranged marriages of a political type (1994, 131)."

In those years, marriage had to serve political goals; otherwise, it was unnecessary. In this sense, the content of marriage was emptied of love and sexual desire. This does not necessarily mean that the content of marriage prior to this period was mostly based on love. Nevertheless, before the revolution, the importance of love in marriage had been growing, especially within highly educated families. Sima, who was nineteen during that time, told me her thoughts on this matter: "We went to the mountains together

with the boys. No, I did not feel any sexual difference. The sexual differences were not there and this was because there was a political atmosphere. Everybody was thirsty for political activities and discussions, and they were thirsty to learn and to understand. These were the things that dominated society. And this marginalized sexual differences. I remember that when university students wanted to marry, we were thinking: "They want to marry?" Marriage had become very marginal. "They want to marry?" We could not believe it. Everybody had to think of revolution and political things; personal life was dominated by political issues."

Mojgan was very young – fifteen years old – during the revolution: "When I worked in a political organization I did not think at all about sexual relations. I had other things in that period that satisfied me and I did not feel any necessity for that. Other people who were not politically active thought that I had a lack of sexual desire because of that. My cousin, for example, was telling me: "You are lying." They thought that either I was hiding something from them or there was something wrong with me. Sometimes they made bets with me that I had to get a boyfriend to prove that I was healthy. Sometimes I even doubted myself: I felt that maybe there was something wrong with me. But I was so busy with my political activities that I did not have time for other things."

Sayeh comments about this situation: "In those years there was a great atmosphere. But the problem was that we did not have the chance to enjoy those years of sexual maturity. [In what way?] I never had a boyfriend, nobody wrote me a love letter. There were some boys chasing me in the streets but that was it. It was really strange; it was a weakness of that period. I think now that it was inevitable, there was a revolution and the atmosphere was like that, so political. We were enthusiastic, and we did not look at the boys around as an opposite sex. There were people who had some relations; I am talking about myself. I do not want to say that everyone who was there was thinking like this. I say that I missed the experiences of youth in that period."

The politicized atmosphere of the years of freedom gave political identity a dominant character. Other identities, such as gender and religious identities – in the case of interviewees with a Marxist background – were marginalized. Political identity was the strong leading factor in life.

When being political became a crime

Those years of freedom were beautiful, but they did not last. Years full of hope and optimism changed to years full of fear and emptiness: a period called "the years of suppression"

by many. In the first months after the revolution, various political groups began clashing. Although people were free to demonstrate and discuss in the streets, disagreements gradually took on more virulent forms. Occasional violent confrontations led to a decisive change of power in June 1981. From that time on, brutal and bloody scenes dominated the streets of Iran, especially in Tehran. Those who opposed the Islamists in power remember those days and the years that followed as hell. Those years were associated with hell as much as the first years of the revolution were associated with paradise. The symbolic use of paradise and hell to explain those events may seem somewhat exaggerated; however, this is the way many activists remember those years.

As discussed earlier, political identity gained precedence during the years of freedom. The political space and political convictions of those years did not allow gender and religious issues to take a prominent place in people's lives. During the period of suppression, political identity came under severe attack and political space was taken away. Other identities came into focus. One of those was that religious identity became an essential part of people's lives. Applying for a job, attending the newly reopened university, in general to live, was dependent on one's religious background. If there were any doubts about one's Islamic background, all doors were closed. For leftist political activists, with their openly expressed anti-religion attitude, it soon became obvious that they had no place in the newly established Islamic society. This was, of course, if they had not already been arrested. What became increasingly obvious to women was that their lives were more and more restricted by new laws, new codes of behavior, and tighter social control.

How did it feel to be a woman?

In the previous part, women expressed their views on the ways in which gender relations changed during the first years of the revolution when women gained more space, and when social mobility opened the potential for individual change. Although political identity shunted women's issues to the side, the question of the marginalization of women increased in importance when the intensive years of political activism ended and women once again faced second-class status on a daily basis.

During this time, people could be attacked on the street for various reasons. One such reason was being a woman who was not dressed in proscribed Islamic dress. Women who came out onto the street had to be worried both about their gender and their political background. Family law changes minimized women's rights in the cases of divorce and child custody. Two of

the women who lost their husbands during that time were in shock for years. Their pain became even deeper when their fathers-in-law gained legal custody of their children. Before the introduction of the new family law in 1985, mothers were not eligible to have legal custody of their children (Kar 1996; Mir-Hosseini 1993). The new law introduced a division of custody rights into *hadana* (care) and *wilaya* (supervision). After 1985, it was thinkable for women to gain *hadana* custody—if they were proven to be "fit mothers"—but *wilaya* was exclusively given to men. Also, "[t]he duality inherent in such a division of custody rights has been minimized by developing the men's share of custody at the expense of women's . Wilaya is not only more emphasized, but encompasses the patrilineal unit by including the paternal grandfather of the child" (Mir-Hosseini 1993, 153). It is obvious that the women interviewed for this article could never came close to gaining even *hadana* custody, because they could not be considered as "fit mothers" with their Marxist backgrounds. They lost their husbands because of their political background, and then they lost their children because of their gender. It was then that they knew what it meant to be a woman in Iran. "During those terrible years and especially after the death of my husband, I really felt what it meant to be a woman. I felt this with my whole body, my flesh and blood. It was so painful that you as a woman did not have any basic rights. Imagine, when my father died twenty-five years ago, my mother was illiterate, but she got the custody of the children. But when my husband died, I was a woman who worked next to my husband; I was the manager of the house. After his death, my father-in-law who was between sixty and seventy years old with thick glasses and a stick, who himself needed a custodian, got the custody of my children and myself. The whole life of my children was in his hands. This was when I had to start my life from zero, but then I did not have the right to move anything without his permission. Women had no right to inherit from their husbands, everything belonged to the children and the children belonged to that old man. This was the most painful thing that happened to me, this I really could not imagine. When I wanted to change the ID card of my children, I could not do it, my father-in-law had to apply for it."

Women, who experienced higher social mobility in the first years of the revolution, were faced with many legal and social restrictions during the years of suppression. Women who started to question traditional limitations to their mobility had to observe them later as their rights were taken one by one. Their legal and social rights were narrowing and becoming even worse than before the revolution (Afshar 1987; Saadatmand 1995; Sanasarian 1982; Nashat 1983; Paidar 1996; Reeves 1989; Tabari 1982). It

was a drastic turning point that had many social, legal, and economic consequences for women. Women political activists faced a double burden in those years, both because of their political background and because of their gender. There was not much space for men and women to interact socially. Years of free social interaction turned into strict segregation of opposite sexes.

Most of the unmarried women of this study married during the period of suppression. Their choice of partner was based on political conviction. Some who had contact with their partners during the years of activism decided to marry them because it was safer to be a married person than a single woman. For women in general, it would have been odd to live alone, so either they had to live with their families or get married. The aspect of safety was also important within the organization: single people were more readily suspected than married couples. Also, it became dangerous for both sexes to be together publicly. People could get arrested while walking with the opposite sex on the street, and if they could not show that they were relatives or partners they could be jailed. This was a risk that political activists could not take (Saadatmand 1995, 21). Whatever the reason for marriage in those years, love did often not have much to do with it. Nahid explains: "In those years no one told me you should love someone to marry. But in those years you thought: "Love, love in the organization? Love did not have any meaning there; the movement is not a joke, you cannot fall in love." This shows how our movement was an infant. When you have an experienced movement they would never consider love as meaningless."

Even when love was present, it was strongly suppressed, which Jaleh later regretted. Jaleh, then a twenty-two-year old, now living in the United States, fell in love and got married during the time of the revolution. "I remember that I was married and I wanted to be alone with my husband, someone I loved so much; and we fought so hard to be with each other. It was almost impossible for us to marry each other: our parents disagreed, but we married at last. Then we married with so much love and came home, but the comrades did not leave us any kind of privacy. Now I have a kind of complex about it, I know this seems like a complaint, but these are pains on my heart. My husband told me that it was bad that we went and slept in the same room with each other in front of x, y, and z. I did not mind this kind of thing, and I was blamed by everyone on that issue. It was the atmosphere of that time: religious even within leftist organizations. Sex was questioned: politics dominated everything. Do you remember that poem, its meaning was something like this: "In the time of struggle it would be a shame if I think of you, my love." You know what I regret the most is that

we never expressed our feelings to each other and that we never had privacy to be together. It is strange because I thought that we were fighting for beautiful things. Is not love beautiful, then?"

As was the case during the period of freedom, marriage was strongly connected to political considerations during the period of suppression. Even when love was involved it was strongly disapproved of by others, or was supposed to be suppressed by the people involved. Even though politics were repressed socially during the years of suppression, political considerations continued to dominate people's personal choices.

"You had the time to think"

When political activity became dangerous, the amount of activity decreased drastically. Activists who had been on the streets from early in the morning until midnight, now had to spend most of their time at home waiting to see if someone would betray them. Many women changed residences and went to other cities. Some were arrested and spent years in jail. Younger people who just had finished high school and did not have a job or a spouse or children to take care of stayed home day in, day out. People who had jobs lost them because of their political activities, or were waiting to lose them at any moment. Those years were years of waiting. This dramatic change from highly active years to years of silence and passivity had a strong psychological impact on women. Many expressed feeling depressed, dead, or lost. People had time to think, which had special importance for young people who became politically active during the revolution and had not had time to think about their activities then. Taraneh mentions this point: "The black period [she refers to the years of suppression –HG] on the one hand was full of black days for me but on the other hand was a period of having time to think. I thought about lots of things in that period. That was a time for everybody to think. Lots of people did their thinking in that period and found their ways. For me it was a time of fear and anger. With each bell that rang my whole body began to shake. I almost never went in the streets. All the news was bad news; there was no good news. They arrested your family, friends, and so on. But next to that you also had ideological problems. We did not have time to face that before, when we became politically active. But we had to confront it in this period. You had conflicts with yourself and with the outside world. I think that both of these were dangerous. I think that the first kind of conflict was the more dangerous. Many people committed suicide. It was something going on inside of you, and there was no one who could help you."

Having so much time to think back over the reasons for their activism made people realize that their expectations had been unrealistic. This realization came at a time when they were facing danger on a daily basis because of those activities. For many, those years were years of internal crisis and external pressure. Taraneh finds the internal crisis the more dangerous. Others became conscious of their womanhood during those years, something that they had up until then ignored. They realized how strongly they had repressed their womanhood, both in relation to their sexuality and to their sexual rights. Many women realized the importance of gender issues during those years of suppression; others discovered that later in exile. Shadi, then a twenty-seven-year-old, now an artist living in the United States, mentions this point: "My political identity became passive in that period, but it did not vanish completely. I still wanted to stay and do something. [...] But I never paid enough attention to myself as a woman. This is something that I had to look at, to see who I was. This happened to me during the suppression years. When my family left for abroad, I lived there alone and that was an opportunity for me to think more about these things. I also played piano then, I always liked music but because of those political convictions I never had paid serious attention to it. In that period of suppression my desire grew in finding out who I was, which also led to discovering my womanhood."

Forced to limit their activities on a political level and to question their political involvement, women now had time to pay attention to their interests in life. Shadi for example found out about her womanhood and her interest in music. For many others this didn't happen until years after that they found their way in life. In those years they lived for the moment and could not think of the future. Their fear of getting arrested or killed did not permit them to do anything but struggle to survive for the moment. During "the spring of freedom" they had hoped to be part of the future of their homeland, a homeland that later became a strange country to them. They lost their home in their own homeland. Once in exile they had to find new ways of creating a meaningful life.

From Marxist Ideologists to Feminists

The past experiences of the women of this study changed them in many ways. They can no longer be satisfied with a simple life bereft of higher ideals. One woman said, "There is no way back: once you have experienced the complexities in life and had higher ideals, you cannot go back and accept a simple life by just having a beautiful house, cooking, and raising the chil-

dren." For many, new ideals have replaced old political ideals. What almost all of them have in common is the wish to make at least a small contribution to changing the world. This aspect of changing the world is expressed in various ways. Some do it by the choice they make in their studies. As one of them told me: "What I do now and my plans for the future are influenced by my past. I am not a member of the organization now but my life is formed by my past: I still have ideals, but new ones. Take for example my choice of study, psychology. This choice is unconsciously or maybe consciously influenced by the past: I want to help people."

Others seek to contribute by voluntary involvement in various human and women's rights organizations. Most of the women in both countries are either involved in women's organizations or active in regard to women's issues and organize gatherings on different subjects related to Iranian women. Others present their ideals through their work as artists. A few remained active participants of Iranian leftist organizations in the new countries. However, this time these women were also strong advocates of women's rights within their political organizations. Others became participants of the leftist organizations of the new country. The most visible examples of the women which fall within this last category and had similar backgrounds with the women of this book are Ms. Sara Amir in the United States and Ms. Farah Karimi in the Netherlands. Ms. Amir, a feminist, was the Green Party candidate for Lieutenant Governor in California in 1998, receiving a quarter of a million votes. Ms. Karimi, also a feminist and a candidate of the Green Left Party, was elected a member of the Dutch Parliament in 1998 and 2002.

Most of the women in both countries consider themselves advocates of women's rights. Sepideh, who now lives in the U.S., was thirty-seven years old during the revolution. Her reflection on the past and positioning in the present highlights the shift from Marxism to feminism beautifully: "During the revolution, it was women's questions that attracted me into politics. I thought then that the solution for women's conditions would come with a socialist revolution. Then, I did not consider myself a feminist at all. At that time, I considered feminism a bourgeois concept. Then I remember that when women came from abroad to Iran and talked about feminism we boycotted them. When I think back I feel sorry that I thought like that. For example I remember that the famous American feminist Kate Miller came to Iran after the revolution, but then I was not interested. [...] This was not all: in Iran I had to suppress myself as a woman in general. I looked at myself as a man. Here in exile I learned to appreciate my womanhood, to find out about my sexuality. I now consider myself definitely a feminist."

The truth of Sepideh's claim to being a feminist is manifested in her activities within different women's organizations in California.

Bita could be considered as one of the few women who have been a feminist both in Iran and during the exile. She was about thirty-eight years old during the revolution and reflects on her experiences in Iran in the following manner: "During the revolution I was active within a woman's organization. Our goal was to increase the consciousness of suppressed women of their rights and teach illiterate women to read and write. But the organization was not that large, and we did not get any support from political organizations. We were so on our own!! It was not normal to work in this way. Everybody wanted to convince us to join a political organization. Most of the people believed that women's organizations were not important enough."

Bita talked with me extensively about the difficulties she had as a feminist in that period in Iran. Once in exile she continued with her contributions to the Iranian women's movement in many ways. She told me that it makes her happy to see that so many women who rejected feminism in Iran have now become advocates of women's rights.

Part of the experience of becoming advocates of women's rights is that past experiences and present convictions have an impact on the lives of these women within their own family structure. These women activists questioned patriarchal ideas regarding women's roles in the family in Iran. This process began before their exile: by that time, they had already begun to reevaluate their gender-based positions in Iran. However, during 'the spring of freedom', the political domination did not leave much room for this consciousness to surface, and the legal limitations of 'the years of suppression' did not leave much space for them to act upon their gender awareness in order to change their living conditions.[3] Once in exile, the space was there, so they grasped the opportunity. The new space in exile led to an explosion of the accumulated awareness of these women regarding their gender. One of the manifestations of this has been in regard to marriage. The marriages in the new country had to be reevaluated and the gender relationships restructured. In this sense a process of negotiation came into existence that involved both men and women.

Marriage challenged in exile

It is generally accepted that the process of migration changes the family structure of married couples. Different studies emphasize that migrant women reevaluate their gender roles and their marriages (Abdulrahim 1993, 75-76; Benson 1994, 83; Krulfeld and Camino 1994,

xii). This is also the case in Iranian families in exile (Darvishpour 1999). Tensions and violence within Iranian families have been discussed, presented, and studied in various ways. An incident in the Netherlands described by the Iranian-Dutch writer and columnist Kader Abdolah illustrates this (*De Volkskrant*, 3 October 1999). An Iranian father killed his 15-year-old daughter and his wife after he accused them of becoming westernized. Kader Abdolah's explanation of the case is that migration changes the power relations in the family, and patriarchal ideas are challenged. This particular man who lost power chose to avenge the situation in a brutal way. The same kind of emphasis is also given by scholars to explain the rate of divorce among Iranians in exile. "The traditional privileges of men have come under scrutiny as many women have become more independent. This is, in part, reflected in the very high divorce rates among Iranian couples" (Graham and Khosravi 1997, 121-22).[4]

However, two circumstances are of particular interest for this study: 1) most of the women, especially the younger ones, entered into marriages based on a shared political ideology; and 2) potential changes in gender relations had already begun in Iran. I showed above how marriages between political activists were influenced by their political convictions. The dominance of politics in those years made it a reason for marriage. Some also married during the years of suppression, but the political background still served as an essential element in marriage, rather than personal attraction or love. During the lives of these married couples in Iran, the social and political pressure was so high that the main concern was to survive. Once in a new country, the situation changed. Politics no longer dominated, nor was there constant external pressure threatening their lives. In this new situation people started to focus on other reasons for being together than just political ones. After some years of living in exile political ideas changed, and this in itself could become a source of disagreement. Of the women I interviewed, nearly all of those who had married based on political convictions were divorced. When the political aspect was not there anymore, they started to question and reevaluate the reasons for their marriage.

Conclusion

The women involved in political activism in Iran experienced a shift in gender relations. The political atmosphere of those years gave them space to stretch the limits of some patriarchal ideas. In those years, it was not taken for granted that a woman's main task was to marry and raise children. The women became publicly involved in political changes and fought against ideas that

limited their activities. However, the political dominance of those years left those achievements latent. Additionally, most of the Marxist activists did not even believe in a separate women's movement. The ones who believed in it were marginalized (Matin 1999). Limitations enforced by Islamic law after the revolution made women much more aware of their rights. The violent political atmosphere during the years of suppression did not leave much space for women to fight against the laws, which forcefully reminded them that they were regarded as the second sex. Nevertheless, the experiences of those years made them more aware than ever of their rights as equals. Thus, awareness of women's rights issues did not first begin upon entrance into the new society, but rather had been an integral part of the women's struggle in Iran (see also Tohidi 1993, 178). This potential knowledge of women's rights, which did not have much room to be practiced in Iran, showed itself once relocated into the new country. Within the new context in which the basic rights of women are safeguarded, the potential knowledge of these women political activists became manifest. This manifestation has had diverse forms. Many became active feminists; others included women's issues in their works as artists, writers, politicians; a few remained political activists in their old organization, but with greater interest for women's issues. The impact on the family structure of these women in exile has been such that, once in exile, most of the women interviewed for this study divorced their husbands. Most of them have probably searched specifically for love in order to commit themselves in a new marriage.

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1For safety reasons and to protect the anonymity of the women interviewed, names used in this article are pseudonyms.

[2] For more on these differences see Ghorashi 2003.

[3] For further studies on the position of women after the revolution, see the following: on compulsory veiling, Gerami 1994; V.M. Moghadam 1993; on legal rights, Afshar 1987; Nashat 1983; Reeves 1989; Tabari 1982; Sanaserian 1982.

[4] On this point see also Darvishpour 1996, 1999; Hannasab 1991; Mahdi 1999; Nassehy 1995; Tohidi 1993.