Int. J. Middle East Stud. **38** (2006), 189–211. *Printed in the United States of America*
DOI: 10.1017.S0020743806382025

Mitra K. Shavarini

WEARING THE VEIL TO COLLEGE: THE PARADOX OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LIVES OF IRANIAN WOMEN

> College education, whatever its form, has always carried with it a consciousness of possibilities for women.
>
> *In the Company of Educated Women*, B. M. Solomon[1]

Iranian college campuses are highly guarded terrains. One enters the gated and walled campuses through security guard offices. Until recently, women's attire—*hijāb*[2]—and makeup would be entirely checked by one of the *khwāharān*[3] at these gates. Today, Iranian women nonchalantly pass through the gates, despite their heavily applied makeup and revealing *hijāb*—a sign of changing social order. Student identification cards allow them through the gates, whereas nonstudent visitors, such as myself, need the prior permission of an administrator to enter. The time of my entrance is recorded, a birth certificate or an identity card is withheld, and a slip is issued to be signed by the hosting administrator. I am instructed to "fix my *hijāb*" and then am allowed to enter the campus.

Iranian women are a visible and significant part of this country's elite public college campuses. For over a decade, the number of women attending institutions of higher education has been growing steadily.[4] In 2003, of those passing the national college entrance examination, *kunkūr*, 62 percent were women and 38 percent were men. This overbalance toward women has sparked wide social and political debates concerning the role of higher education for Iranian women. The Iranian parliament (*majlis)* recently entered into this debate, questioning whether quotas should be placed on the number of women entering Iranian public colleges and universities. The conservatives argue that women's overall access to higher education is threatening traditional values, and if women continue to outperform their male counterparts educationally, it will threaten the sacrosanct family structure that forms the basis of Islamic society.

Amid these social and political debates lies a gaping hole; a void concerning our understanding of how this institution impacts Iranian women. Specifically, what role does higher education play in the lives of Iranian women? In addition, what are the experiences of Iranian women at these institutions? In this manuscript, I examine the experiences of modern-day women in Iranian institutions of higher education. The literature is silent

Mitra K Shavarini was recently Research Fellow at Aga Khan University (International) in the United Kingdom, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, 3 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3RA, U.K.; e-mail: mitra_shavarini@post.harvard.edu

© *2006 Cambridge University Press 0020-7438/06 $12.00*

on these women's own perception and opinions about this topic.[5] Their voices need to be heard. My aim is to advance the discourse on women's role and status in society by presenting an important and growing constituency: highly educated Iranian women. These women's "voices" are placed within a Muslim feminist framework in which Western notions of womanhood are challenged and Muslim ideals are proffered. The data, however, suggest that between theory and reality—between research and data—there is discordance. For Iranian women, higher education does not necessarily provide them with lifetime liberties. Rather, women's "voices" reveal the contradictions of their role in society. In particular, I identify and explore for the first time some sharp tensions that are inherent as young Iranian women begin to explore even limited "freedoms." These tensions revolve around several dynamics: Iranian women being allowed to attend college but not expected or allowed to participate fully and grow academically like their male counterparts; their beginning to understand the possibilities that a college education may bring, but simultaneously realizing the broad limitations placed on them in Iranian society; acquiring training and skills in college that most likely will never be utilized in the paid labor market; being allowed to meet men but not be seen with them; and being liberated from the restrictions of the family home when college is only possible through the crucial support of these same family members. These tensions underlie the central role higher education can play in these women's lives as well as the central role that educated women can play in Iran, the region, and the world, as exemplified by Shirin Ebadi, the winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize. I conclude that higher education is paradoxical: it both limits and expands women's possibilities in Iran.

IRANIAN WOMEN'S PUBLIC STATUS AND ROLE: "THE WOMAN QUESTION"

The role and status of women in Iranian society, or more commonly termed "the woman question," is by definition central to feminist scholarship, which by now encompasses a wide spectrum of thought (e.g., Western feminism, legal feminism, Marxist feminism, postmodern feminism, radical feminism, among others). In this study of the role of higher education in the lives of Iranian women, I pose "the woman question" within an emerging epistemology where the content and form are both Islamic: Muslim feminism. Iranian Muslim feminists[6] began their debate only twenty-five years ago, paralleling the installment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). These vanguard feminists argued that, unlike capitalistic and communist systems where women are exploited as cheap labor, Islam is a sociopolitical and socioeconomic system that does not take advantage of women. They contend that Islam honors, respects, and empowers women.[7] They also assert that the Qur'an states that education is the duty of every Muslim (male and female).

In the Iranian context, however, an "Islamicized" state has not always recognized women's status. Throughout its first decade in power, the IRI undermined the legal and social position of women by repealing the Family Protection Act,[8] banning contraception and family planning, dismissing all female judges, and discouraging many fields of study related to women.[9] Instead, the IRI's ideological campaign in postrevolutionary Iranian society promoted women's family roles.[10] Muslim feminists challenged these policies—not by countering their religious foundations but by reinterpreting them. Similar to the works of other Muslim feminists in the region, it is an ideology that has grown out of women's activism toward improving women's legal, social, political, and economic situation in the Muslim world.

Therefore, although Iranian Muslim feminists cite education as the most important social vehicle for the advancement of women's status in Iranian society, to date, there has been scant empirical research to investigate its connection to women's advancement in society. In fact, little is known about girls/women's education: few studies look at girls' access to education at primary levels[11] or the gender-role socialization of children's textbooks[12]; educational policies have been analyzed in relation to the Islamization of the educational infrastructure, rather than to women per se[13]; and policies and their impact on women and higher education have only been discussed in Persian sources.[14] Consequently, our knowledge about girls' and women's education is limited. If education is deemed important in the lives of Muslim women, then we need to understand the role it plays in women's lives.

Women's Education in Iran

The history of women's education in Iran is relatively new. Girls have been allowed into schools for only a little over a century, and admitted to colleges and universities for only 75 years. Women's education is rooted in religious and political debates concerning the role of education for Iranian women and began as a hodgepodge of predominantly Western influences. "Modern schooling" for women as prescribed by the United States of America, England, France, and even Russia appeared in Iran as early as 1835.[15] The first school for girls was opened that year by American missionaries in the predominantly Christian town of Rezaiyeh; it was attended by Armenian and Assyrian girls. By 1875, missionaries had opened a school for girls in Tehran that enrolled Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish girls. During this period, although some elite Muslim families provided their daughters with private tutors, in general, Muslim daughters were denied an education. The social and political resistance to girls' schooling came from the Muslim clergy who were concerned that education would threaten the fabric of Islamic society.[16] For faithful Muslims, girls' education was only desirable when it was in harmony with Islamic strictures. It was not until 1899 that the first school for Muslim girls opened in Tehran.

By the 1920s there were approximately 58 schools in Tehran that provided education for approximately 3,000 girls.[17] Gaining the support of traditional Muslim families so that they would enroll their daughters continued to be very difficult, and efforts to increase the number of Muslim girls in schools were met with indignant opposition.

It took more than a century from the opening of the first school for girls in 1895, and the forceful rule of Reza Khan of the Pahlavi dynasty (r. 1925–41), for girls and women to substantially participate in schooling in Iran. In 1932, supported by liberal intellectuals, Tehran University opened its doors to Iranian women. Admitting women to Iran's system of higher education symbolized Reza Khan's modernizing agenda that included reforms to the status of women through their participation in the educational system.[18] Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–79), son of Reza Khan, espoused a similar political agenda in that he looked toward Western development models for Iran's modernization and advancement. His policies regarding women's education accelerated the expansion of the secular education of girls and women in the 1960s and 1970s.[19] Before the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, female enrollment in universities had reached a peak of 30.9 percent.[20]

Although many lauded the increase in women's higher education enrollment as evidence of women's advancement under the Shah, the statistics concealed vast numbers of Iranian women who were not represented in the educational system—women who were illiterate, poor, tribal, and/or rural. For instance, rural and poor women, most often more traditional and more religious than their urban counterparts, elected not to go to Pahlavi's "secular" schools. This urban–rural and socioeconomic discrepancy illustrates how the Pahlavi's educational agenda affected only a small portion of Iranian women (and men)—those from urban upper class families with access to education.[21]

Women's education under the IRI When Khomeini came to power in 1979, his newly formed Islamic Republic inherited a "Westernized" education system that was fundamentally secular and promoted education for a small segment of Iranian women—urban, elite women. His newly formed government set out to "Islamicize" the country with the educational system as its top priority. This system of "purification" required the educational system to be culturally and religiously transformed. The overriding objectives were to stress values over knowledge, to make education meet the needs of society, and to eradicate what remained of the influence of the Pahlavi period.[22] To this end, curriculum contents were scrutinized, dissident faculty was purged, and educational institutions became gender segregated.[23] Khomeini's regime also executed Farrokhru Parsa, who served as the first female Minister of Education under the Shah; she was accused of "corrupting young girls" while serving as minister.[24]

Although Khomeini shunned Western-style education, he strongly advocated Islamic education to advance his political and social agenda. Khomeini believed that women should be educated to the extent that it did not interfere with a gender-segregated society. Regulations were put in place concerning what women could study barring nearly half of available fields of study.[25] For example, women were forbidden to study veterinary medicine, geology, agrarian sciences, animal husbandry, and natural resources.[26]

Once the educational system was deemed "Islamicized," there was greater freedom in the negotiation of women's roles within its system. As a result of the lobbying efforts of the Women's Cultural and Social Council, many of the restrictions on women's higher education were slowly lifted. By the mid-1990s, with all limitations lifted, Iranian women began gaining admission to fields that, before the revolution, had been male dominated.

One of the most commonly cited reasons for women's advancement in entering institutions of higher education has been attributed to the solid and strong Islamic identity that Iranian universities have established. It is an atmosphere that has secured the trust of traditional religious families who make up the vast majority of the Iranian population. Sociologist Jaleh Shaditalab states,

> Before the revolution some families did not want their girls to go to school because their teachers would have been men. But since it came in an Islamic packaging, people were more willing to accept it as Islamic education. That's why you see the rate of enrollment in schools rise. Now we see the share of girls in universities . . . families now think the universities are teaching Islamic

> beliefs, and that there is no harm in their daughters going to university because they are sleeping in [single-sex] dormitories.[27]

Women's ability to gain access to higher education may be due in part to the "Islamic packaging" of higher education. It also reveals that college has become the only viable institution through which young Iranian women can alter their public role and status.

SEEKING THE VOICES OF WOMEN: METHODOLOGY

The role of gender in Muslim societies is an understudied phenomenon that lends itself to an inductive approach to data gathering, a method that can best be characterized by grounded theories.[28] The approach employed in this study is consistent with social anthropologists and phenomenologists who "consider social processes to be too complex, too relative, too elusive, or too exotic" to be studied within structured and explicit conceptual frameworks.[29] The approach is essentially an organic process where, once in the field the researcher identifies the sample, recognizes the appropriate data collection process, and designs the instrument. The method, which must adapt to cultural and political nuances, accommodates a wide range of perspectives so that findings may be triangulated.

Context for Research and Role of Researcher

Conducting research in Iran is a difficult task. In a milieu of pulsing Islamic fervor, collecting data on Iran's system of higher education, which inevitably reflected young Iranians' questioning of strict religious and cultural norms, is treacherous. The data presented here were collected during fieldwork in Iran in the summer of 2002 and the winter of 2003. This was a time of heightened sensitivity, as the U.S. presence in two neighboring countries—Afghanistan and Iraq—threatened IRI's legitimacy. The Iranian college students in this study—all born after 1979—are part of a cohort known to Iranians as children of the revolution, or the "fruit of Iran's 1979 revolution." This generation of approximately 21 million in 2001[30] entered school during the early 1980s and have been educated in a system that has been reformed to transmit the Islamic ideology to Iran's future generations.[31] Ironically, it is precisely these students who are challenging the ideology under which they were raised. Exposed to other social norms, political systems, and ideologies through the media and the Internet, these college students reveal their frustrations around gender roles and expectations, challenging and questioning some of the strict religious and social norms of behavior dictated by revolutionary tenets that restrict women's advancement in Iran. The students' robust responses to the questionnaire that I administered reflect this eagerness to share their aspirations and frustrations with an outsider—one who happens to be an Iranian-American.

As both an Iranian woman and a U.S.-trained researcher, I am able to use a dual perspective, both inside and outside of the Iranian women whom I study, to design, collect, and analyze my data. Anya P. Royce would identify me as a "cultural broker"—someone who is able to communicate with two distinctly separate worlds.[32] On the one hand, the "insider's perspective" of being an Iranian woman enables me to effectively communicate with, and to a great extent understand, my participants; it is a source of

المنــارة للاستشارات

www

TABLE 1. *Sample*

	No. Distributed	No. Collected
Shariati University	300	140
Tehran Polytechnic	100	87
Bu Ali Sina University	100	90
Personal channel	100	100
Total	600	417

knowledge and insight. On the other hand, as a Western-trained researcher I am able to follow research protocol that disconnects my own personal experiences from those of my subjects.

Data Collection

I translated a self-designed questionnaire into Farsi and subsequently edited it several times for clarity and political sensitivity. It included one page of demographic information and twenty-nine questions (nine multiple choice, twenty open ended) designed to illuminate participants' college experience.[33] The questions touched on family life as well as perceptions and experiences of college. For example, respondents were asked about dormitory living, classroom and curriculum issues, and the students' hopes and aspirations.

The questionnaires were officially sanctioned and supervised by the Ministry of Education and each college's administration. Securing permission from governmental authorities was mandatory before I approached any colleges or universities. For this research, they provided a letter granting me permission to conduct research, providing that each school would distribute, collect, and review the questionnaires before handing them back to me. Despite previous approval of the questionnaire and its distribution, one institution (Shariati University) alerted authorities that students' responses could be politically sensitive and thus 160 of the 300 completed questionnaires were confiscated.

In reaction to this official action, I used personal contacts to distribute another 100 questionnaires at Sharif and Tehran Universities, two of Iran's most prestigious institutions; ten students distributed ten surveys each. Altogether, I collected a total of 417 completed questionnaires.[34]

Sample

Respondents in this study attended five Iranian universities: Shariati University,[35] one of two women's universities established after the revolution, which has a student body of approximately 4,000 and an all-female faculty and administration; Tehran Polytechnic,[36] a coed institution that has traditionally been male dominated, although in recent years it has seen a dramatic shift in the composition of the student body; Bu Ali Sina University, a coed institution in the city of Hamedan;[37] Sharif University; and Tehran University (see Table 1).[38] This sample can be described as "purposive" or "theoretical sampling" as are those of researchers who use the grounded theory approach.[39]

It should be noted that access to higher education has been expanded to include Iran's minorities, and, as such, this sample captures Iran's unique linguistic[40] and ethnic diversity.[41] Among the respondents are Iranian Fars (69%), Turks (15%), Kurds (8%), Lurs (6%), and Gilak (2%). It should also be noted that some of the respondents were older than the typical Western undergraduate. One explanation is that some students who fail the *kunkūr* take it until they pass—a practice commonly referred to as "staying behind the test" (*pusht-i kunkūr hast*).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study is based on grounded theory, an inductive approach that required each questionnaire response to be considered independently. The open-ended responses generated a myriad of issues that were coded and organized along themes. In sum, four themes emerged through the analysis as factors that paradoxically both facilitated and inhibited women's college experience: sense of self, real-world experiences, influence of family, and financial empowerment. For each of these themes, I assigned women's "voices" that were reflective. Once these "voices" were selected, they were translated from their original Farsi text. Despite my efforts to translate their statements as accurately as possible, translation inevitably loses some of the original connotation. Words that have no direct translation have been directly introduced with the closest English definition parenthesized and/or footnoted. My aim was to preserve the integrity of women's voices that were open and revealing about the realities of their lives. I purposefully have avoided quantifying responses; to do so, I believe, would have weakened my emphasis on women's words.[42] Finally, it should also be noted that themes were examined along ethnic, socioeconomic dimensions, as well as respondents' rural/urban background; findings later note where there were variations along these factors.

FINDINGS

A Sense of Self: Intellectual Development but Little Academic Growth

Iranian women's college experience fosters nonacademic intellectual growth. The experience is one of self-growth, self-actualization, and self-respect. What college seems to shed from young Iranian women are their sheltered upbringings. Before college, their daily lives are literally confined to their homes; there is very little young, unmarried women can do outside the home. Freed from the dictates of family life, they begin to understand themselves. It is the first, and sometimes the only space, where Iranian women have a public presence. Within this public space, they begin to understand themselves in relationship to Iranian society. A twenty-two-year-old Iranian Lur from Malayer, a town on the outskirts of Hamedan, "sighs" that, other than studying, there are very few options for young Iranian women.

> Outside of school I didn't have any particular activity but to study. I spent most of my time at home. I didn't have a special place to go. I loathed the small town mentality/environment of *shahristān*.[43] I wanted to be free, to be able to engage in sports activities. I sigh that I was not permitted to do so.

She comes from a family of nine siblings whose parents never earned their high school diploma. Her brothers have followed their father's footsteps of becoming tradesmen in the local bazaar, but all supported her to go to college. Now studying Arabic literature at Bu Ali Sina University, she alludes that entering college was a goal because there was nothing else for her to do. Similarly, another twenty-four-year-old from Sharif University, majoring in electrical engineering confirms that, in Iranian society, there is not much to do but study for young Iranian women. She states,

> In our society, girls have nothing else to do except study. They can have no fun or entertainment. They cannot work. With all the societal limitations for girls, we [girls] have only one thing to do and it is to study.

Socializing is limited to family events where they get together with female cousins and, on rare occasions, with high school friends who come over for "*mehmūnī*" (a social gathering). A twenty-year-old fashion design student at Shariati briefly describes one such gathering. She states,

> Sometimes I'd be able to have my friends over. My mother would make us lunch and we'd put on some music and dance.

She is originally from Isfehan, a large and touristic city where there is high exposure to foreigners. Neither of her parents holds a high school diploma, and although they are not highly educated, they afford their daughter the ability to socialize with her female friends. Her reference to music and dancing reflects her family's willingness to accept a less-stringent facet of religion. She goes on to explain,

> Now in our dorm room, every night I dance with my roommates. Some of my roommates have never done that before; I'm one of the lucky ones because my parents let me have my friends over.

Her reference to being "lucky" is made in comparison to her college roommates who come from families where such female gatherings are shunned. For most women, entering college has meant breaking out from their tightly sheltered family upbringing. In this next quote, a twenty-two-year-old Iranian Turk studying sociology at Bu Ali Sina University explains how her personal world has expanded and how college has helped lift the "blinds" that limited her view.

> What I have gained from college has been gaining an independent life, finding friends and learning social behavior. I used to look at society and people through blinds. It was a limited view. My horizon has been expanded. Now life has become more valuable. I see myself with value and as one who is worthy of that value. I have gained self-respect.

One of the ways in which these young women's understanding of their lives expands is by the mere virtue of moving to another city to go to college. When asked about how much traveling they had done, the majority of these women indicated that they had not traveled before college. None had traveled outside of the country; those who had "traveled" had visited relatives in a nearby city. It was also interesting to find that "travel" for many of the respondents who came from religious families meant *ziyārat raftan* (visiting of a holy shrine).

For most of these women, college is their first chance to leave their homes and travel beyond the boundaries of their small towns and villages. This experience alone is a leap toward personal growth that helps these women to see possibilities and shape their expectations. For these young women, entering college is an awakening—an understanding of their own self—one that stems from being on their own. Until now, their sense of self was entangled with that of their families and even their small communities. Their notion of self rested on the collective family identity and not their individual selves. Understandably, being on their own and being separated from family can also create feelings of loneliness. A twenty-year-old Iranian Geelak studying graphics at Sharif University in Tehran whose family is from Ramsar, a small town near the Caspian Sea, explains that going to college in Tehran is marked by a duality: a sometimes lonely but largely a growing experience. She states,

> I have gone through a lot of changes. My expectation from life has risen, tremendously. Even though every once in a while I feel empty. But I try to think about life in this big city [Tehran] and life's bigger possibilities. This is what college has done for me.

This loneliness seems to be more a sense of independence than being lonely per se. They are not talking about a lack of friends, isolation, desolation, and/or depression. The *tanhāʾī* (loneliness) is their interpretation of being and living on their own. Unraveled from controlled home environments, young college women understand their sense of self in society and the complications that this Muslim society poses for them in terms of their gender. This discovery of self for them is associated with loneliness. A twenty-two-year-old dental student at Bu Ali Sina University puts it quite succinctly:

> Before college I looked at life in a simple way. But now, I have entered college, I have entered society. I see life's complexities.

Women's acquired sense of self manifests in their appearances on college campuses. Black pencils heavily line their eyes, rouge is painted across their cheeks, and a rainbow of colors gloss their lips. A far less-restrictive environment for women's *hijāb* than years before has enabled young women to reveal more hair under their *rūsarī*, to wear above-knee *mānto*,[44] and colorful shades of eye and lip makeup. IRI authorities would consider these transgressions of the traditional dress code for a devout or proper Muslim woman. A nineteen-year-old student at Shariati University told me that, "makeup is our political resistance."[45] It is a form of self-assertion that is frustrating college administrators. At Shariati University, one administrator told me during an interview that "they [students] think that college is a fashion show." She then posed this question; "Do women care so much about makeup in the States/West?"

These college women seem to become socially savvy, although not necessarily academically astute. Nearly all respondents expressed strong disappointment in how little they learn in college. Two general issues seem to pose as obstacles for women to gain academic knowledge: a lack of qualified professors, which is common with most developing nations; and not being taken seriously as female college students.

The scarcity of good professors is a recurring reason behind their inability to develop academically. One twenty-one-year-old dental student at Bu Ali Sina University says that,

> We don't have many knowledgeable and professional professors. Those who don't know the topics they are teaching make their classes extremely difficult for no reason at all. Only to make us small

> [humiliate us]. Or they don't show up to class at all. In the end, their lack of knowledge works out bad for us in two ways. We don't learn and we get a bad grade.

Another student, a twenty-four-year-old textile engineering student at Tehran Polytechnic, ascribes the lack of access to knowledgeable professors:

> They [administrators] will have to start the class at the beginning of the semester and if they can't find anyone to teach the course, they just put anybody to show up to teach the class. I often know more about the subject than the professors who are up there in front of the class. They don't know the answers and send us to find our own answers. It is very frustrating.

Their limited access to qualified and as they repeatedly refer to as "knowledgeable" professors is exacerbated by their gender. As most often is the case, professors are male and these "knowledgeable" professors are often out of reach to female students. Another engineering student studying biomedicine at Tehran Polytechnic describes the general situation for female students:

> We can't just go and talk to the male professors, even if it is strictly to improve or expand our knowledge. People will talk if you make a [office] visit more than once. The door to their office has to be open so no one suspects anything so if you want to discuss a sensitive issue you can never approach your professor in their office. It is always right after class with a lot of people shouldering you for the same attention from the professor. You can barely talk or reach your professors.

Not being taken seriously in class is the second obstacle that disables these women's advancement academically. Their gender not only makes it difficult for them to discuss academic issues with their professors but it also seems to act as an obstacle in classroom participation. Most women complain about the way that they are treated in the classroom by their male counterparts and/or their professors. A twenty-three-year-old biology student at Bu Ali Sina University puts it this way:

> Sometimes they [professors] make it unreasonably difficult and sometimes it is not difficult but in most cases it doesn't make a difference whether I am in class or not. My presence in class doesn't count.

These young women resent that they are looked down upon in classroom environments. For some of them, the environment makes it difficult to speak up and be heard. Yet for others, the atmosphere of ridicule angers them enough that they *do* speak out, albeit resulting in being marked as troublemakers. A twenty-one-year-old electrical engineering student at Tehran Polytechnic University says,

> In class, if you know they [professors] are wrong and you want to argue the point, they single you out as a troublemaker. So these classes become a one-way discussion, men only.

Indeed, these respondents expressed a strong disappointment in how little academic knowledge they acquire in college. Their words describe their college experiences as having more to do with self-realization than with academics per se. Although higher education provides little in terms of academic fodder, it nonetheless has tremendous value to these women as it widens their personal scope. In the words of one twenty-year-old respondent from Tehran, "my *fahm* (intellect) has gone up, not necessarily my *sawād* (academic knowledge)."

Real-World Experiences: Increased Hope and Opportunity for Second-Class Citizens

In Iranian society, entering college, and by extension, acquiring higher education credentials, offers the promise of social and financial mobility for young adolescents. The competition that surrounds the college entrance examination is one testament of how highly coveted college credentials are in Iran. One can imagine that, for women living in a restrictive Muslim society, college embodies hopes and dreams to transcend their realities. One respondent who had not included any demographic information anonymously said the following:

> More than anything I wanted to go to college. My parents, my relatives, my friends, everybody, I wanted to show them all that I could pass *kunkūr* and get in. I would get a lot of respect if I passed. My parents would be most proud.

The "respect" her quote makes reference to was repeatedly mentioned by other students. The respect a woman gains by being accepted into college transforms her presence within and outside her family. This in itself is a strong motivator for young Iranian women. What this reveals about their pursuit of education is that in a society where their rights and choices are curtailed, higher education—extolled as an equal right for all in this society—has come to hold the promise of respect and recognition for women. A twenty-two-year-old literature student at Tehran University writes,

> Women are always looked at as *qeshr* (an extra layer) in this society. They're small and *haqīr* (insignificant). College finally grants us our share of the society. As a result, girls get their worth and importance in this society.

They hope that college would enable them to free themselves from the limitations of their society. To many it is *the* road to freedom, the *only* equal right given to them in Iranian society. It is this "right" that characterizes the nature of determination behind today's young Iranian women's stride toward college. A twenty-year-old biomedical engineering student at Tehran Polytechnic University who comes from a relatively well-educated family—a father with an associate degree and a mother with a high school diploma—believes that in Iranian society college is women's only "right." She states,

> The only right women find that is granted to them and is encouraged is the right to an education. Even Khomeini used to preach that women must get an education. In today's Iranian society, women are considered "second-class citizens." They have no rights; no place in society, there is no place for women's rights. Going to the university has become the only thing that we are allowed to do.

Despite fierce academic competition that has enabled them to access higher education, young college women learn that in college their "intelligence" is not valued, much less respected. They learn that there are on dual tracks in college, separated by gender, that offer and treat them differently. What is expected of them in college is entirely different than their male counterparts—expectations that are markedly inferior. Although women state that college is their only "open door," one can also hear such an opening leads them to an institution that treats them no differently than the broader Iranian society. They pursue college with aspirations to free themselves from societal pressures, only to find that college is just another context where gender roles play themselves out. Respondents

www

explained their frustrations of not being respected, not having rights, not being able to do what they dream about, and not marrying who they desire. Their expected societal role is to become wives and mothers, the revered position for women in Islam. Ironically, even though Islamic tradition exalts motherhood and the institution of marriage, these women seem to believe sanctioning them to these two roles works against them in their daily realities.

Other than their expected roles as mothers and wives, women are generally isolated from participating in society. There is a connection between these women's statements of feeling marginal and their naiveté about social life. Because they have been isolated and have not experienced life in the public sphere, they feel and know they are treated lesser to men. Young women described this position, repeatedly, as marginal—as "second class citizens."

A substandard social position is created for these women when they lack knowledge about life beyond that of their families. Their most salient feature of this seclusion is that they have not learned about diversity and/or the opposite sex. Prior to college, not only were they not allowed to socialize with the opposite sex, but also they did not come into contact with the diversity of Iranian ethnic cultures. For instance, in the Hamedan region where Bu Ali Sina University is situated, there are Kurds and Turks among the "mainstream" Fars. Yet, these ethnic communities dramatically curtail contact with one another. Amazingly, these young women grow up in towns, villages, communities without ever coming into contact with "other types of Iranians," as was put in one questionnaire. They know these "other" ethnic groups exist, but it is a coexistence that is solidly void of contact. Thus, when young women enter college, their understanding of the variety of cultures that exist in Iran is quite limited. A twenty-one-year-old electronic engineering student at Shariati who grew up in Tehran admits that she was not aware of diversity among Iranians. She explains,

> My college experience has allowed me to come into contact and deal with people with different languages and religions—the ones that I had absolutely no knowledge of before coming to college. My preconception of these religions was not positive. I have also learned about different cultures.

What is striking about her comment is that she grew up in the capital city, one of the only places in Iran that is demographically diverse. Yet, she has never encountered "different languages and religions." This finding shows how little young women are exposed to and have experienced about their "world" before entering college.

More profound than learning about diversity in and about their society is their social experience with the opposite sex. College is the first public context in which young Iranian women and men come into social contact with one another. This twenty-two-year-old dental student at Bu Ali Sina University states,

> While I was living at home I had no contact with the opposite sex. Actually, I better say I didn't have permission to have contact with them. But since I have been in college, my unique experience here has been to have contact [with men]. I am more comfortable around them [men] now. My perception towards the opposite sex has completely changed.

This young woman's statement is not hyperbole—her perception of the opposite sex has "completely changed" in very powerful ways. Segregated from the opposite sex at an early age, it seems that she has just begun to awaken to the realization that there is indeed a male "gender," one that she can come into contact with—as though she now realizes that the two genders can coexist beyond segregated spheres.

Although contact between the sexes is monitored and tightly controlled, young men and women surreptitiously find ways to communicate and to meet. Comments about how telephone numbers are exchanged under the watchful gaze of authorities abound among these college women. For many, the exchange of telephone numbers with the opposite sex is a "game." Rendezvous' are orchestrated outside the college campus to avert the watchful eyes of the school administrators, even though it is known that there are just as many monitors beyond the college campus walls. One of the most notorious forms of off-campus scrutiny is conducted by a government body called the *kumīta* (morality squad) whose patrol cars roam city streets night and day looking for social violations. A twenty-year-old graphic design major at Shariati University describes the punishment for coming into contact with the opposite sex:

> Last month, several of us made plans to go out to a movie. When my girlfriends and I arrived at the movie theater, I shook the hand of my brother's roommate, Keivan. Just then one of *kumīta* (morality squad) patrols drove up. One of the morality guardians got out of the car and asked what this man's relation was to me. When I told them it was my brother's roommate, they asked Keivan to go into the patrol. We were so scared for him. It happens all the time but each time, it still scares you. It leaves you trembling. They drove Keivan around for twenty minutes shouting at him and slapping him across the face. When he came back, there were tears in his eyes. We decided not to go to the movie that night after all.

Not wearing the proper *hijāb*, or being in the company of an unrelated male, are two common violations for college women in this Muslim society. Depending on the severity of the misdemeanor, women and/or the person whom they are with are either reprimanded on site or taken into custody where they are served with a penalty. A twenty-year-old physics major at Tehran Polytechnic University explains that they never know exactly what their punishment may be:

> One night a whole bunch of us were walking back to the girls' dormitory. A patrol drove up and asked what the relation was of the boy walking next to me. I told him we are college mates. He started shouting and yelling at him but then found out that he was from his hometown. So he hit him across the head and told him that he better watch his steps next time. He let him go because he was from the same hometown.

It appears that women take these risks of being arrested and/or humiliated to simply learn about the opposite sex. This may be viewed as physiological curiosity between the genders, but there seem to be more complicated reasons behind these stealthy encounters. It could be construed that these young women are trying to gain leverage in the social role that is expected of them in the broader Iranian society—that is, to find a suitable husband. It is their way of figuring out the game of courtship.

In one scenario, a respondent's anecdote illustrates how such a "game" between young men and women comes with a "high price tag." She recounts a story of how authorities caught her and her boyfriend during their school holidays; a memory revealing that these women endure physical and emotional scars in their quest to find a male friend, partner, or even husband. As a twenty-four-year-old physical education major at Tehran University, she recalls her bitter memory:

> Last Noruz[46] they caught my boyfriend and me walking together. They detained us and interviewed us separately. When our stories did not match, they lashed each of us. I didn't care about the pain of being lashed. I was so humiliated. That is what really hurt.

Contact between men and women *is* risky, and the punishment *can* be severe. Yet, risk and cost aside, college women manage to socialize with their male college counterparts in and outside the college campuses.

Finding a suitable husband is a powerful subthread in these women's words. For many, finding a man who has an equal, if not a better, college education seems a difficult task. There is a social stigma connected to marrying men who are less educated, and in today's Iran, this is an increasingly challenging agenda. A twenty-four-year-old Iranian Kurd majoring in music at Tehran University explains,

> The positive part of my college education is that I will be able to be a better mother. But here is the negative part to it—I'll also have a hard time finding a suitor. It disqualifies many of the suitors that our family knows. Boys are at a disadvantage for marriage when women have more education than they do.

Another twenty-three-year-old electronic engineering major at Tehran Polytechnic looks at the situation quite pragmatically. She says,

> After graduation we [women] get married and end up at home and/or we will never use our education. Even, in regard to marriage, our education will create a bigger problem for us . . . outdoing them [men] in education will make it more difficult for us to find a husband.

Thus, their college degrees eventually make it more difficult for them to find a suitable husband. Their "education" tilts the balance against them, because Iranian men with lower credentials might consider college-educated women as more demanding, less subservient, and more independent—all qualities that could threaten the institution of marriage in this Muslim nation. "Independence," after all, is construed as characteristic of Westernized lives where a sense of self supersedes cohesion of the family unit. Independent, or not, Iranian society perceives educated women as such. In a Muslim society where women are purportedly treated as second-class citizens, independence creates a strong tension that makes the lives of these college-going women difficult.

College elevates hopes and increases opportunities, because *only* with a college degree can these women have a better chance of becoming participating members of society, understanding themselves and feeling independent for the very first time, coming into contact with the opposite sex, and increasing their value in marriage. In reality, however, this promise fails. Out of college, these women will most likely not find employment, will not gain independence, and will have difficulty finding a suitable marriage partner. They do not get integrated into society, and, educated, they are relegated to the confines of their homes. Isolation from the public sphere continues after college. In the words of one twenty-one-year-old woman from Hamedan, "college is a four-year detour from our father's house to our husband's."

Family Influence: A Force That Both Enables and Disables

Another relevant factor in the college experience of Iranian women is the role of family, defined as both immediate and extended. I found families to play a crucial role in enabling women to succeed in gaining access to college but, at the same time, limiting their life before and after college. I also found that women either described their families as *mazhabī* (religious) and/or referenced them as *sunnatī* (traditional). There is a fine line between these two descriptors. Although some families are both religious and traditional, not all religious families are traditional.

> My family is very religious. My father is a clergyman but he is not very *sunnatī*. He encouraged me to study and to come to college. When I am ready for marriage, I know they will let me decide whom I want to marry . . . I'll of course consult with them but it will be my decision in the end.

In the above quote, a twenty-two-year-old Iranian-Turk at Shariati University describes her family as *mazhabī* but not *sunnatī*. Her family lives in the city of Qom, known for its theological schools, holy shrines, and the Islamic governing body. Her family is observant: for example, they pray five times a day, fast during the holy month of Ramadan, and attend *rawdha*.[47] She distinguishes her family from a *sunnatī* family, one that would follow traditions that are either rooted in the Persian heritage and/or Islam. For instance, a *sunnatī* father would decide his daughter's marriage partner, despite her judgment. S*unnatī* families are generally strict and patriarchal.

Surprisingly, both religious and/or traditional families are described as supporters and facilitators of women gaining access to college. For instance, women discuss how their entire families helped them study for the college entrance examination. A twenty-two-year-old physics major at Tehran Polytechnic who comes from a village, Harseen, and a *mazhabī* family of six children whose parents are both illiterate, explains:

> All my family expected me to do was to study. From the moment I woke up to when I went to bed I couldn't do anything else. Just study. My mom even made me extra rich foods so that I had extra energy to study. I studied day and night. There is nothing harder than getting ready for *kunkūr*.

The above quote illustrates how an illiterate mother whose life was devoted to household chores proffered whatever help she could to help her daughter to succeed—that being nutritious foods.

Another twenty-year-old graphic design major at Shariati University states that her brother and sister cleared out of their shared bedroom in their Hamedan apartment so that she could have ample space to study. Similar stories of "family sacrifice" and dedication to women's education abound in these women's responses. Most women seem to attribute their success in gaining access to college to their families. However, their comments are also balanced with a sense of needing to escape a "confining" family environment. In this next quote, a woman from the village of Marvdasht studying biology at Bu Ali University describes her family environment as "suffocating":

> Most Iranian girls, in order to escape the dictating conditions of their home environment—they do their best to get accepted to college, especially in a town away from their hometown so that they can flee the family pressures that suffocate them.

One would suspect that smaller towns might be more inhibiting of girls' freedom. Yet, comments that addressed women's need to escape the family environment are equally prevalent among small communities, such as Iranian ethnic minorities (e.g., Kurd, Lur, Turk) as they are among those who are Fars and from major cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, or Mashad. Ostensibly, families who live in small towns have to abide by stricter local religious and traditional customs as there is a tendency to monitor neighbors' lives. Indeed, among those who come from smaller villages and towns, there is more mention of their families' concern about "what other people say." However, a need to break free from the family environment is mentioned across the spectrum, regardless of the size of community, ethnic background, and/or parents' level of education. Whether they come from a small town or a city, or whether their parents were educated, these women seem to covet being on their own, having independence, and breaking away from their families' control. A twenty-year-old Iranian Kurd from the small town of Sanandaj explains,

> Girls face so many problems with their families and with society as a whole that they force themselves to escape these problems and to find shelter through education.

Ironically, "shelter" is used to refer to being *away* from family life, as though college becomes the refuge that "protects" them and offers them independence. In the eyes of these women, family control is disguised as family support. Even though this support has helped them to get to college, they would just as much like to break away from it. A woman from an entirely different background, a twenty-four-year-old student studying atomic engineering at Sharif University, believes that entering college has meant gaining independence. She comes from an urban, educated family and was raised in one of Iran's major cities—Mashad. Both her college-educated parents work: her father is an aeronautical specialist and her mother a nurse. She also identifies with the sense of independence that college life affords young Iranian women and explains that,

> In most Iranian family environments, a girl who attends university and one who does not, *never* share the same liberties. And for an Iranian girl, the most important way to escape her family environment and gain freedom and independence is to enter university.

Despite the fact that these young women express their desire to gain independence and to seek shelter away from home, the question that remains is why do religious and traditional families extend them leeway to gain an education? One would surmise that Islamic tenets urge women to become educated so that they would be better mothers. However, I found that the primary and often only reason for families' support is to increase the potential marriage possibilities of their daughters. A twenty-three-year-old Iranian Lur from Nahavand attending Bu Ali Sina University and majoring in Social Work believes that Iranian families see college as the vehicle that can help women gain better social positions, particularly through marriage. Both her parents—her father a government employee and her mother a housewife—neither of whom completed their high school, strongly promote college. She states,

> Parents now have a better understanding and pay a lot more attention to their daughters [college] education. The expectation is that once educated, they will have a better place in society and a better future both for marriage and financial possibilities.

"The better place in society" and the "financial possibilities" this woman alludes to are both ordained through marriage. Thus, the promotion of college by families—both religious and traditional—stems from an understanding that education will help improve their daughters' future chances of marrying into a higher or at least equal to their own social stratum. In this economically deprived nation, obtaining an education is the only hope for a better life. These families do not feel that allowing their daughters to become educated contradicts their Islamic beliefs. In fact, both the Qurʾan and the Traditions of the Prophet (Hadith or Sunnah) state that education is the duty of every Muslim (male and female). In addition, because institutions of higher education are "Islamicized" under the IRI, families accept and encourage their daughters to pursue education. As such, they are willing to modify their religious and/or traditional beliefs to align with contemporary pressures facing their daughters' future. Families as enablers make accommodations for their daughters' future; as disablers, they set restrictions before and after college.

Financial Empowerment: Preparing for Jobs That May Not Materialize

Financial empowerment was a fourth theme that emerged. Regardless of their socioeconomic background, women indicated that they would not like to be dependent on their families or husbands and that they would like to be able to work. Finding a job is closely equated to freedom, independence, respect, and social status—all qualities, in their opinion, of which Iranian women are deprived. They hope college would enable them to find employment, allowing them to perhaps parlay the financial gains and economic independence into other less tangible but vitally important rewards that are shortchanged them in Iranian society. In the following quote, a nineteen-year-old computer science major at Bu Ali University elaborates on the importance of working after earning her college degree. She considers working not only as an essential financial component of her future goals but also one that is associated with social and intellectual status.

> The most essential goal for my future is to be a contributing member of the society in a way that I can strive for higher social status and higher intellectual status. However, one of my biggest problems is to be financially independent and to have sufficient income.... Ever since I entered the university I have wanted to work. It is for certain, and I believe, that a woman even in her marital relationship when she can have a source of income of her own and not to be fully dependent on someone else, she will have tremendous self-respect and at the very least she will not feel like a burden on anyone, at least financially. Similarly, when a woman finds employment, her job/work will have a positive impact with her social interactions.

She voices an undeniably strong-willed desire by college women to have a public role, specifically one that is participating in the labor market. She is talking about feelings of being empowered and of having self-respect gained through financial independence. Voices like hers reveal that these women's ideal is that a college degree will allow them not to be financial burdens on their future husbands. In other words, they hope their education leads them to financial independence. A twenty-year-old mechanical engineering student at Tehran Polytechnic reveals chinks in the powerful social model that dictates women's roles as mothers and wives.

> I will work under any condition, any condition at all. Regardless, I believe that a woman, in particular, an Iranian woman, with attention to her psychosocial condition, must have a job outside of her house. Iranian women are under a lot of pressure. They don't have the same freedom that Western women have so they have to make sure that they push their way into the job market.

Statements such as this reveal that women certainly do want to get jobs, whether for financial reasons or for the sake of what she refers to as their "psychosocial condition."

It is important for them to feel they are contributing members of society, one that is not necessarily achieved through their prescribed Islamic duty as mothers and wives.

However, inasmuch as these women would like to "push" their way into the workforce, the Iranian labor market fails to facilitate these college-educated women. In commenting about finding jobs after college, women list a host of obstacles they foresee as barring them from the labor market. One twenty-three-year-old engineering major at Tehran Polytechnic places the issue as women's broader societal confrontation, conjuring an image she calls a "battle":

> My battle starts the minute I walk out of my home each morning. As I am waiting to catch a *sawārī* [ride], I endure honks and lurid comments by passing male motorists; during the ride I am made offers of *sīgha* [temporary marriage]. At the university gate, I am stopped and told that my makeup and *hijāb* are improper, and in class my comments are dismissed or discredited by my male peers and male professors as "emotional female viewpoints." Do I think I will find a job after I graduate? What man in this society is going to take me, take us [women], seriously enough to hire us?

The step by step visual encapsulates women's sense of being subjugated in this society and resonates in other women's responses. Many ascribe this to the Iranian *farhang* (culture), *mard sālārī* (patriarchy), or *farhang e Islami* (a merging of religion and tradition), which relegate female roles firmly to the domestic sphere, or in general, to an inferior position.[48] Interacting with other societal forces, such as politics or the economy, this male-favoring culture is further intensified. A twenty-four-year-old chemical engineering student at Tehran Polytechnic University states,

> I think that because of the governing conditions in the working atmosphere in Iran, working in a place that I have interest in (petrochemical refinery) will be extremely difficult because they [men] have a hard time accepting that a woman can also possess such skills or to be able to do the same type of work as men.

Her quote summons an inhospitable working environment, a by-product of a *farhang* that favors men in the labor market. These women indicate that, if there is a job to be found, it goes to men who are seen as the primary bread earners, albeit that the job could be performed better by a female. Such an assertion has also been cited by studies on the Iranian labor market[49] and are further confirmed by those who do the "hiring." At Tehran Polytechnic University, an administrator stated that, even though they prefer female employees, the jobs are ultimately given to men. When asked to elaborate, he states,

> If we were to hire for a position and it came to a man and a woman, we would prefer the female. Men usually hold a couple of jobs in order to maintain their family but with women you have a dedicated employee. The men are either tired between jobs, can't work longer hours, or don't concentrate . . . a host of reasons why women make better employees than men. The bias or the sexism that exists in the labor market has to do with our *farhang*.

The administrator's explanation reveals that *farhang* goes beyond religion and tradition; it also includes economic and social factors that shape culture. His reasons for why a job would go to a man over a woman have more to do with economy and social biases than religion or tradition. One should also note that religious law also configures into

www

notions of culture. In this Islamic society, religious law dictates that a woman needs her husband's or father's permission to work outside the home. Without their consent, women—educated or not—may not hold employment. *Farhang* is multifarious: socially, if a married woman was to hold employment that would reflect poorly on her husband as a capable provider for the family; legally, the man is afforded the right to refuse his wife from employment and, thus, to block her economic independence. Independence threatens the core Islamic unit—the family structure. Withholding economic freedom from women ensures that women remain obediently within the confines of family, thus preserving a pure Islamic society. A twenty-one-year-old Iranian Turk majoring in graphic design at Tehran University discusses the complicated nature of her desire to work in the Iranian context:

> For me, working is extremely important but . . . because I am a girl and I live in a *shahristān* after my education I am expected and forced to stay home. This is the biggest problem for me because I would like to enter society and not stay behind . . . I dread to be idle at home after I graduate. Our society is so religious and in most cases superstitious that I feel after my studies I will become a loner at home. And, I won't be given the permission to live life the way I want to and make decisions for myself. I like to use my time productively but I don't have any decision making power. I can't make plans for my future on my own accord. So I am forced like many other women in our society to wait for my fate, at home.

This woman references incomprehensible cultural and religious traditions as "superstitious." She is frustrated that she cannot make decisions for herself and that she has to live out her life according to predestined dogmas.

Despite college women's expressed desire to work, Iranian women continue to remain largely outside the workforce. In fact, only 15.1 percent of Iranian women work for wages outside the home.[50] This figure is not only significantly lower than for Iranian men, it is among the lowest in the world.[51] The prospect of finding a job after obtaining a college degree seems formidable, considering the boundaries that are set for women in Iranian society. Instead, those women who financially need to work end up taking traditionally female jobs. For example, a twenty-one-year-old female electrical engineering student at Sharif University, where one's *kunkūr* scores have to be among the highest in the nation to be admitted, feels frustrated that she worked so hard to get to college and compete with men in her classes, only to find that her best alternative after graduation is teaching, an acceptable female profession.

> Employers think that technical jobs are for men. If I work, I will probably teach. Private sector jobs are co-ed and I know I will face harassment. In this society, teaching is an acceptable profession that provides a *muhīt-i sālim* (safe and healthy environment). I have better grades than half the men in my class, but I'll end up teaching and they will end up with the well-paying jobs.

What good is their higher education, then, if society cannot utilize women's education? What are these women supposed to do with that education that has been training them, supposedly, for a job that will never materialize? The answers to these questions are the paradox of women's higher education in Iranian society.

THE PARADOX OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Understanding the role of higher education in the lives of Iranian women brings to focus IRI's concerns about the growing numbers of women on public college campuses. As young Iranian women continue to press for acceptance into higher education, and have reversed the gender gap, government officials' fears have also been elevated. They fear that women's increasing access to higher education is incendiary to the sacrosanct family structure of this Muslim society. Better educated women are considered too independent and may find it difficult to find a husband. In this society, a woman who remains unmarried can potentially pose social havoc. The remedy, as IRI policymakers see it, is to place limitations on female college enrollments. It is a discussion that is noticeably void of the very voices that such policies will impact: young Iranian women.

In this study I sought to hear college-going women's voices and to understand the role higher education plays in their lives. These women reveal that college is fertile ground for personal growth, the only accessible lever by which women hope to raise their social status and gain respect—from others as well as themselves. They begin to see themselves and society as part of a broader picture, one not limited to their immediate families. Before attending college, these young women seldom participate in activities beyond the private sphere of their homes. In college, they come into contact with different people, the opposite sex, and learn about themselves and the complexities of their society. Their college experience provides them with intellectual growth that raises expectations: socially, they claim more independence and equality in marriage and community; and, economically, they demand to become full participants in the labor force. For them, higher education is the only public space that gives them limited freedom and hope for a better future.

Although college represents a land of opportunity where they envision new possibilities for themselves, there is also a deepening realization of the far-reaching limitations placed on women in Iranian society. This is the paradox of their college experience: the very nutrient that gives these women sustenance to grow, also poisons their hopes. Once these women are admitted, they realize that college replicates the broader Iranian society. They are not taken seriously in class, nor are they expected to find employment thereafter. College turns out to be a social experience, not an academic endeavor, in which they fulfill their prescribed female role of finding a husband in Iranian society. Their newly developed aspirations are dimmed as they graduate from college and find that they are relegated *back* to the private realm—and restrictions—of their homes; or, ironically, they find that their higher education, which they hoped would improve their marriage prospects, now "overqualifies" them with most Iranian men. This finding highlights the contradictions and complexities of an educated Iranian woman's life: that a college education, although exposing women to life's possibilities, also paradoxically leads them to realize what lies beyond their grasp.

The findings in this paper also reveal that embedded in each theme are concepts that need further exploration. There is a distinction between *mazhab* (religion), *sunnat* (tradition), and *farhang* (culture). Whereas *mazhab* implies religious tenets of the holy Qur'an, *sunnat* are locally specific customs that have developed throughout history. The latter are patriarchal traditions that can be traced back to pre-Islamic Iran but ones that have been instilled through religious teachings. These two interconnected and distinct forces—religion and tradition—impact the lives of Iranian women and are convoluted by a clerical polity that interprets Qur'anic laws and sets societal rules. The combination of these forces, *farhang e Islami*, is a complex web of social mores: mores that are based on conflated religious, legal, political, and economic factors. The complexities and subtleties of these concepts warrant a more in-depth discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper. An analysis of religion alone is therefore insufficient. Future research should examine how each of these concepts relates to Iranian Muslim women's education.

In conclusion, my findings reveal that the number of women on university campuses is a testament to women's strong-willed desire to use this institution—this public sphere—to push the envelope. Subject to humiliation and worse, young women assume the risk of using their *mānto* and facial makeup as a way of asserting themselves behind the Islamic garb prescribed by the authorities. Wearing the veil to college is a visible sign of their mounting determination; such that they continue to be at the center of a political and social dilemma. By arguing for quotas, policymakers are missing the tremendous value and potential this institution can have for Iranian women and for the broader society.

NOTES

[1] B. M. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

[2] Refers to the veil and/or proper, modest Islamic dress.

[3] Literally translates to "sisters," although in postrevolutionary Iran, the term refers to a female government employee.

[4] Shahla Kazemipour, "Evaluation of Women's Expanded Participation in Higher Education." A report prepared for Iran's Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, 1999.

[5] Mahnaz Kousha's recent publication *Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002) is one recent scholarly work recognizing the importance of women's own perceptions and opinions about their realities.

[6] Until now Iranian Muslim feminist discourse has been situated in women's weekly and monthly magazines. See for example Etezadi Tabatabai, *Zan Ruz*, June 1981; F. Hashemi, *Ettellaat,* 28 July 1980; *Zan Ruz*, June 1991.

[7] L. Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women, Feminism, and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[8] The Family Protection Act of 1967 and 1973 restricted polygamy, raised the age of marriage for girls, and allowed women the right to divorce.

[9] Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," *Signs*: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27 (2002): 1135–71.

[10] Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Power, Morality, and the New Muslim Womanhood," in *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*, ed. Myron Weinter and Ali Banuazizi (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 366–89.

[11] Golnar Mehran, "Ideology and Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Comparative Education Review* 20 (1990): 53–65.

[12] Patricia Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari, "Sex-Role Socialization in Iranian Textbooks," *NWSA Journal* 3 (1991); Jacquelline R. Touba, "Cultural Effects on Sex Role Images in Elementary School Books in Iran: A Content Analysis after the Revolution," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 17 (1987): 143–58.

[13] J. Matini, "The Impact of the Islamic Revolution on Education in Iran," in *At the Crossroads: Education in the Middle East*, ed. A. Badran (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 43–55; Hammed Shahidian, "The Education of Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (1991): 6–38, 12–14,

17–20; Khosrow Sobhe, “Education in Revolution: Is Iran Duplicating the Chinese Revolution?” *Comparative Education Review* 18 (1982): 276.

[14] S. Ghahreman, “The Islamic State’s Policy Towards Women’s Access to Higher Education and Its Socioeconomic Effects,” *Nimeh-ye Digar* 7 (1988); S. Mojab, “State Control and Women’s Resistance in Iranian Universities,” *Nimeh-ye Digar: Iranian Women’s Feminist Journal* 1 (1991): 35–76.

[15] Reza Arasteh, *Education and Social Awakening in Iran, 1850–1968,* 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: E. J. Brill, 1969).

[16] Guity Nashat, *Women and Revolution in Iran* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983).

[17] Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[18] Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women’s Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

[19] Hamideh Sedghi and Ahmad Ashraf, “The Role of Women in Iranian Development,” in *Iran: Past, Present and Future*, ed. J. W. Jacqz (New York: Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1976).

[20] Kaveh S. Mirani, “Social and Economic Change in the Role of Women: 1956–78,” in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, ed. G. Nashat (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983).

[21] Said Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Nikki Keddie, *The Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981); Mojab, “State Control and Women’s Resistance in Iranian Universities,” 35–76; Robert E. Rucker, “Trends in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Education,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 21 (1991): 455–69.

[22] David Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 227.

[23] Mojab, “State Control and Women’s Resistance in Iranian Universities,” 35–76; Rucker, “Trends in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Education,” 455–69; Sobhe, “Education in Revolution,” 276; Farideh Selhoun, “Iran,” *Integrateducation* 20 (1983): 13–14.

[24] H. Esfandiari, “The Politics of the ‘Women’s Question’ in the Islamic Republic, 1979–1999,” in *Iran at the Crossroads*, ed. John L. Esposito and R. K. Ramazani (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 75–92.

[25] Matini, “The Impact of the Islamic Revolution on Education in Iran,” 43–55.

[26] Men could not enter such fields as dental hygiene, midwifery, family health, fashion design, and sewing-instructor training.

[27] Quoted in Jane Howard, *Inside Iran: Women’s Lives* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2002), 84.

[28] M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990).

[29] M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994).

[30] “Employment in Iran” in *Eqtesad-e Iran* 6 (November 2003): 39–40, http://www.netiran.com/php/artp.php?id=24.

[31] Sobhe, “Education in Revolution,” 276.

[32] Anya P. Royce, *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1982).

[33] An optional section asked whether the respondent was willing to be contacted for a personal interview. Of the 417 respondents, 212 provided their contact information from which I followed up with 34 interviews; time did not allow me to contact all students who had expressed an interest in follow-up interviews. Interview data were used to explore themes; data in this paper are from the questionnaires.

[34] In addition to these surveys, I also interviewed men and women who opted out of the college track, as well as with those who had failed the college entrance examination and had enrolled in a private college (such as Azad University). I also conducted formal interviews with seven college administrators. Their comments have helped inform the content of this work.

[35] The university is named after the Iranian thinker Dr. Ali Shariati (d. 1977), whose published lectures during the 1960s and 1970s had a great impact on the debate concerning women in an Islamic society.

[36] Depending on the field, female students at Tehran Polytechnic range from one-third to two-thirds of the total students enrolled in each department. The university provides training in fields such as electrical engineering, biomedical, textile manufacturing, and so forth. Women who are accepted at Tehran Polytechnic have some of the highest college entrance examination scores in Iran.

www

[37] The social climate in cities other than the capital city, Tehran, is considered more traditional and religious. My intent in including an institution outside of Tehran in my study was to pose a counterpoint to what I heard from students in what is considered a cosmopolitan setting.

[38] Sharif University, established in 1966, is one of the largest engineering schools in IRI and has a student body of approximately 8,000. Tehran University was established in 1934 and was the first to admit women.

[39] B. Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence Versus Forcing* (Mill Valley, Calif.: Sociology Press, 1992); A. Strauss and J. Corbin, eds. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edition. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998).

[40] Languages in Iran are generally divided by linguists in two groups: Western (Gilaki, Mazandari, Tajik, Tati, Talishi, Kirmanji, Baluchi, Parachi, Ormuri, Luri, Sivandi, Gabri, and Qumzari dialects) and Eastern (Afghi, Ossetic, Yaghnobi, Munjani, and Pamiri). For a discussion of Iran's linguistic diversity see Richard Nyrop, *Iran: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: American University, 1978).

[41] Some of the major ethnic groups in Iran include the Gilani, Mazandaranis, Kurds, Turks, Lurs, Bakhtiaris, and Baluchis.

[42] M. Belenky, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[43] Commonly referred to as smaller provinces or townships.

[44] Muslim women must abide by a modest dress code, *hijāb*, that covers their body and hairline. *Rūsarī* refers to a woman's headscarf, and *mānto* is a loose fitting overcoat that can be worn in place of a chador, the traditional body covering for Muslim women.

[45] Her comment echoes a statement made by Farzaneh Milani in "Lipstick Politics in Iran," *New York Times*, 19 August 1999.

[46] *Noruz* is the Persian New Year celebrated at the turn of the vernal equinox (21 March) of a calendar year.

[47] *Rawdha* may be metaphorically defined as "the Garden of Paradise," where believers interact and recall the principle beliefs of Islam during eulogies for different Shiʿi martyrs. The term originally comes from a book called *Rawdhat al-shuhada* by Mulla Hossein Kashifi (who has compiled *Lubb-i lubab-i mathnawi*). He was the first person who compiled a book with such content, and later on, it became prevalent in Shiʿi circles. Since then, whenever such sessions are held, they are called *rawdha*.

[48] Women's "lower status" in the Muslim world predates the advent of Islam and was tied to social and economic conditions of the time and geographic region. These ingrained cultures were so well established that they altered the early teachings of Islam (see Nashat, *Women and Revolution in Iran*). As Leila Ahmed states, "conceptions, assumptions, and social customs derived from the traditions in place in the Middle East at the time of the Islamic conquests entered into and helped to shape the very foundations of Islamic concepts and social practice as they developed during the first centuries of Islam." (Quoted in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992], 5); Two popular Iranian Islamic thinkers, Dr. Ali Shariati (d. 1977) and Ayatollah Mortaza Motahhari (d. 1979), have both offered seminal texts that urge Muslims to distinguish religion from social custom. For example, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Sharia in Post- Khomeini Iran," in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 285–319. Dr. Shariati's most famous work is *Fatemeh is Fatemeh*; and Dr. Motahhari's text is *The System of Women's Rights in Islam*.

[49] Center for Women's Studies, *Gender Dimensions of Labor Market and Employment Patterns in the IRI* (Tehran: Center for Women's Studies in Tehran University, 2004).

[50] Ibid.

[51] United Nations, *Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Country Profile*, no. 15 (New York: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Statistical Profiles, 1998).

www

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

www.manaraa.com