

Middle East

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Debating Gender with Ulema in Qom

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the re-introduction of *shari'a* law relating to gender and the family, women's rights suffered a major setback. However, as the implementers of the law have faced the social realities of women's lives and aspirations, positive changes have gradually come about. Since the late 1980s there has been a growing debate in Iranian books and journals between proponents of different approaches to gender in Islam. During 1995, a series of discussions were held with clerical contributors to the debate in which clarification was sought for the jurisprudential bases for their approaches to gender issues.

Qom is the main centre of *shici* religious learning and power in Iran. After the foundation of the Islamic Republic, clerics were charged with establishing the religious basis of the new regime's programme and its social, economic and political order. Besides, they had to manage the difficult transition from a standpoint of opposition to one of power. As the regime has increasingly faced the real contemporary issues of social policy and practice, the religious scholars have had to make accommodations in many key areas of Islamic doctrine and law. One of the key areas has been that of gender relations, and the legal, social and political rights and roles of women. The process of accommodation intensified after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, and has been accompanied by lively debates about the 'question of women'.

Defending or reconstructing notions of gender

I have been following these debates as an anthropologist and a student of Islamic law. My aim is to understand the varying notions of gender that lie at the root of *shari'a* family rules, and how the custodians of the *shari'a* in Iran today – the *shici* clerics – attempt variously to perpetuate, modify, deconstruct and reconstruct these notions of gender. At first, the main sources used were a number of books and journals, published in Qom and Tehran, which clearly formed part of a public debate in which highly divergent perspectives were being aired. Two journals of particular interest and significance were found. Both were launched in 1992, but they took radically different positions. One, *Payam-e Zan* (Women's Message), based in Qom and run by male clerics, defended the *shari'a* and the gender inequalities inherent in its legal rules. The other, *Zanan* (Women), based in Tehran and run by women, argued for gender equality on all fronts.

Zanan advocated a brand of feminism that takes Islam as source of legitimacy. Each issue had a legal section which examined and discussed the restrictions placed on women by *shari'a* laws. From May 1992, the tone and style of these legal articles began to change, slowly but surely taking issue with the very premises on which the official *shici* discourse on the position of women is based, and laying bare their inherent gender bias. These articles were unprecedented: first, they made no attempt to cover up or to rationalize the gender inequalities embedded in *shari'a* law. Secondly, they had something new to say, a thesis. There was consistency in the approach and the progression of the arguments. Each article built upon the premises and arguments established in earlier ones. They were published under different male and female names, but it was evident to me that they were written by a single person, someone well versed in the sacred sources and in the *shici* art of argumentation.

Before long I found out who the author was: a young cleric, Hojjat ol-Eslam Seyyed

Mohsen Sa'fidzadeh. In April 1995, two women activists I knew, the lawyer Mehrangiz Kar and the publisher Shahla Lahiji, organized a meeting for me with him. I had just finished a paper in which I analysed *Zanan's* legal articles, pointing out their novel approach. We discussed my paper and Sa'fidzadeh agreed with my analysis of his writings; we began a programme of collaborative research. He provided me with his unpublished manuscripts to study and comment. He also introduced me to gender debates in Qom and facilitated my research there.

This was my first experience of the clerical way of life and thinking. The strict codes of gender segregation and *hejab* that organize time and space meant that I spent most of my time with women. Sa'fidzadeh's teenage daughter, Zahra, was always present. In Qom, I stayed in the house of a pious preacher of modest means; his home was small, consisting of three connecting rooms and a courtyard housing the washing and toilet facilities. He had six children, one of them a boy of eighteen, yet gender segregation was so effectively maintained and the space so innovatively divided by curtains that I never set eyes on this young man – nor he on me, as I was told. I also spent long hours with the women of this family and many others in Qom, many of whom saw no contradiction between Islam and their rights as women, wholeheartedly believing in and drawing power from all the rules that I saw as limiting and oppressive to women.

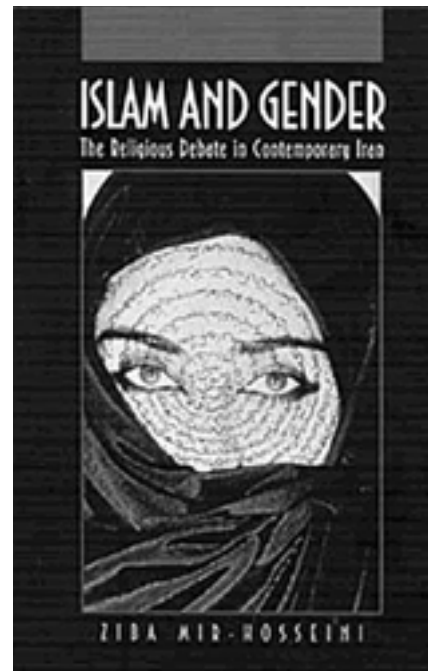
Traditionalists, neo-traditionalists and modernists

Between September and November 1995, and then in winter 1997, I met and interviewed a number of leading protagonists of gender debates in Qom, including the clerical editors of *Payam-e Zan*. I also searched for books, pamphlets, and tape recordings of sermons that dealt with women and gender relations. I found three main perspectives: 'traditionalists' insisted on patriarchal interpretations based on 'complementarity' but 'inequality of rights and duties' between women and men; 'neo-traditionalists' attempted to introduce 'balance' into traditional interpretations; and 'modernists' sought a radical rethinking of the jurisprudential construction of gender.

In my book *Gender and Islam: The Religious Debates in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999; London, I. B. Tauris, 2000) I relate the three perspectives and place them in their social, cultural and political contexts. I examine key passages in written and oral texts and narrate my discussions with the authors, presenting them in an order that reflects the chronological development of the concepts and conveys something of their context, while relating my engagement, as a Muslim woman and a social anthropologist educated and working in the West, with *shici* Muslim thinkers of various backgrounds and views.

There are three parts to the book. The structure and format of chapters in each part differ, reflecting the nature and extent of my engagement with the texts and their authors. The two texts discussed in Part One represent the viewpoint of clerics who see the gender model in *shari'a* law as immutable and their mission to be to convince

others of this truth. One is by Ayatollah Madani Tabrizi, a senior Qom cleric, the other by Ayatollah Azari-Qomi, a government cleric who played an important role in the first decade of the Islamic Republic. Although I talked with both ayatollahs, my engagement with their texts is limited to selecting passages for full translation, and paraphrasing and summarizing the rest: our views on gender and our understandings of Islam were so different that there was little room for a constructive dialogue.



The four chapters in Part Two recount my discussions with the clerics of *Payam-e Zan* and their mentor Ayatollah Sane'i – known for his progressive views on women's issues. Although they too staunchly defend the immutability of the gender model manifested in Islamic law, they admit the need for change in practice and seek new interpretations. They published transcripts of these discussions in their journal in 1996. I use them to shed light not only on the gender debates but also on clerical modes of thinking and argumentation. Unlike Part One, where the authors of the texts and I could only repeat our positions, here the clerics and I managed to engage critically with each others' premises and arguments. These four chapters are, in effect, co-authored.

The two chapters in Part Three concern texts which represent a theoretical break from conventional legal wisdom, and my engagement with them goes further than with those discussed earlier. One deals with lectures by Abdolkarim Soroush, the most prominent among contemporary Islamic intellectuals in Iran. Although he is neither a cleric nor an exponent of gender equality, I devote a chapter to his ideas for two main reasons. First, his approach to sacred texts has not only enabled women in *Zanan* to place their demands within an Islamic framework, it has encouraged clerics for whom gender has become a 'problem' to address it from within a legal framework. Secondly, it is in response to the challenge implicit in Soroush's ideas that some clerics have had to admit that their understanding of the *shari'a* is subject to change and that they must find new arguments, or else they must abandon the claim to rule in the name of *shari'a*. Soroush's ideas undermined the very basis of their exclusive right to religious authority.

In the final chapter, I discuss the work of my guide Sa'fidzadeh, whose articles in *Zanan* provided the impetus for my research. He calls his approach the 'equality perspective', contending that it is found in the work of some eminent jurists, alongside the dominant approach, which he calls the 'inequality perspective'. He sees his achievement to be in articulating the 'equality perspective' coherently and shaping it to accord with current realities. Sa'fidzadeh was the only cleric I could find who had radical ideas on gender and was willing to air them in public. He later became a victim of the struggle between modernists and traditionalists, which took a new turn following the 1997 presidential election that brought Mohammad Khatami in power. In June 1998, following the publication of an article in the liberal daily newspaper *Jame'e* (now closed), in which he compared the gender views of religious traditionalists in Iran with those of the Taliban in Afghanistan, he was arrested. Five months later he was released; his crime was never announced, but he lost his clerical position and is now forbidden to publish his writings.

The three parts are framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion, placing Iranian texts and debates in the context of religious politics and approaches to gender in Islam. Each part begins with a brief introduction to a defining text on women, and each chapter builds on and adds a new dimension to the arguments presented in the preceding one. Chapters in the first two parts begin and end with narratives of my visits to Qom in 1995 and 1997 and meetings with the authors whose texts are discussed. These accounts are intended to draw attention to the taken-for-granted, shared meanings that underlie life in Qom, the familiar routines that inhabitants take as natural. By narrating an ethnography of my personal engagement with a series of texts and their authors, I aim to provoke other Muslim women to write more revealingly of their changing trajectories. We need to know more about these personal trajectories if we are to understand the relationship between feminism and religious politics. ♦

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