

Middle East

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Women's Religious Seminaries in Iran

The implementation of the *shari'ah* and the institutionalization of gender inequality in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution have provoked general discontent among women and triggered their mobilization against segregation laws. As a response to their demands, Islamist women parliamentarians have been forced to prepare motions to defend more adequately women's needs and rights in both the private sphere of the family and the public sphere, maintaining that the teachings of Islam are not respected.

Women not only challenge the institutionalized gender inequalities by emphasizing their activity in the economic, social, and political realms that are not forbidden by the religious and political elite's reading of the *shari'ah*, but they also assert their authority in the religious and judicial realms where women are denied power. Because authorities justify such prohibitions by referring to the Qur'an, the *shari'ah*, the *hadith* (sayings and practices attributed to the Prophet and the imams) and Islamic tradition, the challenge for women necessarily entails debates that revisit and reinterpret Islamic principles. To this end, women *mujtahids* (doctor of jurisprudence) are needed more than ever. Following the death of Mrs Amin-Isfahani, a woman *mujtahid*, in the early 1980s, Iran has

deprived women in order to boost their activity in the public sphere. The seminary has established a credit system which collects money from the pious rich and grants interest-free loans to the poor:

Our interview was constantly interrupted

'In Tehran and Qom we assist several poor families who have lost their heads of households. We pay for the educational and other expenses of their children, prepare dowry for their daughters, equip their homes with water and electricity, etc. We also provide financial assistance to a school with 2000 students in a poor neighbourhood of Tehran. We also provide several female university students with financial assistance, one of whom just graduated in engineering. We have established free loans.'

by women who called or came by to seek advice on practical and spiritual matters. Some had serious family problems, others asked religious questions. Fatemeh Amini believes that a woman *mujtahid* should be capable of solving a multitude of problems. The following is a brief account of her involvement: 'With the support of the late Grand Ayatollah Kazem Shari'atmadari, I created Maktab-e Tawhid in Qom. I then founded three more seminaries there before moving to Tehran, where I founded Fatemeh-ye Zahra religious seminary in 1988.'

A divorced woman and a mother of two daughters, Fatemeh Amini is convinced of women's capabilities but regrets the low self-esteem of her counterparts:

'Our Prophet raised the status of women but many of them are still ignorant. Women have not acknowledged their own capabilities yet. They do not value themselves. They have not yet realized that they can be everything they want to be: doctors, engineers, mujtahids. They [men] have not wanted to make women believe in themselves. I am 61 and work over 12 hours a day. I obtained my divorce in 1965 less than two years after my marriage. I worked and raised my children alone with a lot of hardship. But I'm proud of myself because they are both well educated and successful. One is a medical doctor and the other is an engineer. My own parents were against women's education and did not let me go to school. I actually obtained my high-school diploma after the revolution at the age of 47. I was even admitted to university but decided not to enrol. I then worked as a schoolmaster in Qom for 6 years but was not satisfied with my new job and preferred to go back to religious seminary. But I had serious disagreements with others on educational methods and how to manage a religious seminary for women. As a result, my working conditions were not satisfactory in Qom. Besides, my daughters were studying in Tehran. I therefore decided to join them and founded Fatemeh-ye Zahra religious seminary. Our main aim here is to form women mujtahids. According to the Qur'an, men and women are equal. [...] The society needs women doctors and engineers as well as women mujtahids. But there is an important resistance against women attaining the degree of

ijtihad (interpretation). Without these obstacles, which seriously hinder their training, we could have had at least 50 women mujtahids since the revolution. A lot of young women study at these seminaries but nobody encourages them. When I came to Tehran nobody [no religious authority] supported me either although they all knew me for years. A bazari provided me with a basement flat and a factory owner paid my teachers. One of my students then suggested that we move to avenue Dowlat and introduced me to the imam of the neighbourhood mosque who agreed to help me. He gave me this building, which was falling apart. I worked hard for two months to renovate it and began our courses shortly afterwards. We are independent and have over 250 students, many of whom are also university or high school students. Like at other religious seminaries, they study for four years. In addition to ordinary curricula, common to other religious seminaries, we also offer courses on public health, ecology, home management, and the like. These are taught by university professors. Owing to the lack of financial means, I have not been able to hire an adequate number of teachers. As a result, many of my students have been enrolled for five years without being able to finish all courses. Our aim here is to educate women mujtahids as well as women capable of finding solutions to women's problems, including their social problems. Our goal is to contribute to women's development by giving impetus to their creativity, thereby also increasing their self-esteem.'

The challenging of dominant interpretations

Women's mobilization against 'the dispossession of women of their power in the realm of the sacred'² is not limited to training women *mujtahids*. Because several articles of the Civil Code (e.g. men's unilateral right to divorce and polygamy) find their origins in the Qur'anic verses, especially that of *Al-Nisa* (Women), women challenge the dominant readings by the clergy which they consider as distorted. By presenting their own interpretations, they intend to show that Islam accommodates the equality of rights between women and men. Women who have religious training are better equipped to deal with religious issues. For example, *Payam-i Hajar*, edited by Azam Taliqani, the daughter of the late radical cleric Ayatollah Mahmoud Taliqani, was the first to publish an article (in 1992) refuting the legalization of polygamy and proposing a new interpretation of the *Al-Nisa* verse:

*'The analysis of the Qur'anic verse on polygamy shows that this right is recommended in some specific cases and exclusively in order to meet a social need in view of expanding social justice. [...] Contrary to the ancient time, the modern state and its social institutions are conceived to assist needy families. Therefore, polygamy has no social function to fulfil. [...] It has been shown that in reality it is pleasure rather than charity that motivates men to become polygamous.'*³

Nahid Shid is a lawyer who has both a religious and a university education and has initiated several amendments to the divorce law, in particular *ojrat-ol mesl*, the principle that says when a man files for divorce his wife can ask to be compensated by her husband for the housework she has carried out during the marriage. She maintains that 'the bulk of the enforced laws can and should be changed because they are not divine orders. They are based on secondary orders. Blood money is one of them; it was determined when men were valorized as warriors who contributed to the expansion of Islam. Women, however, were devoid of such social values. Times have changed and the law should reflect this change. This law cannot be functional in a society in which women are medical doctors, university professors, engineers, and the like. Blood money should be the same for men and women.'⁴

By questioning traditional gender roles and identities, and by advocating equal rights, these women are also constructing their own religious models, thereby acquiring autonomy vis-à-vis male religious authorities. ◀

Notes

1. The 1996 National Census of the Population and Housing, p. 77-81.
2. Héritier, Françoise (1996), *Masculin/féminin, la pensée de la différence*, Paris: Odile Jacob.
3. Ebn-Eddin, Forouq (19 Shahrivar 1371/10 September 1992), *Luzum-islam-i qavanin-i talaq, t'addud-i zujat va hizanat* (The necessity for the reform of laws concerning divorce, polygamy, and child custody), *Payam-i Hajar*, pp. 28-29.
4. Personal interview, Tehran, February 1996.



Women's meeting place for prayer and commemoration of the Moharram in Gonbad-e Kavous (Northern Iran).

been devoid of female religious authorities. This shortage has led some religious women, who believe that such undertakings necessitate the training of women in relevant fields, to create religious seminaries for women. One of the implications of this undertaking is the autonomization of women in the realm of religion. Young women, including university or high school students, increasingly seek religious training and enrol in religious seminaries. In 1996, out of 62,731 students in religious seminaries, 9,995 (or 16%) were women, 34% of whom were in the age group 20-24, and 20% in the age group 15-19. Almost 90% of these women resided in urban areas.¹

Fatemeh Amini: founder of the earliest women's seminaries

The first religious seminary for women was founded in Qom in 1972 by Fatemeh Amini. I met her in 1994 at her fifth religious seminary, a modest two-story building in a *bazari* neighbourhood in northern Tehran. Unlike her students who wore a *maqna'eh* (headgear), she wore a black chador. They all take their shoes off before entering the main hall and walk around with slippers or socks. While several older women were sewing a traditional Iranian blanket for the trousseau of a poor bride, younger ones were doing paperwork, answering the phone or serving tea. Mrs Amini led me to a huge room serving as a classroom with no furniture, covered with cheap Iranian carpets offered by a *bazari*. We sat on the floor and she explained that in addition to training women, the *Mujtahids* Fatemeh-ye Zahra religious seminary also financially and morally assists

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