

**Facing the Conflicts and Complicities between  
Capitalist Modernisation and Islamisation**

A Study of Women's Subjectivities and Emancipatory  
Struggles in Iran

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with understanding women's emancipatory struggles and efforts to challenge their secondary status in Iran, but with reference to other Muslim societies in the Middle East. To explore the possibility of women's emancipation in Iran, the thesis focuses on, firstly, the position of women in relation to the forces of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation; secondly and more importantly, on women's main convictions and inner-conflicts, and how these are shaped by those forces. The thesis thus seeks to grasp the structure and dynamics of women's subjective field and to identify distinct subjective patterns which would constitute different responses to their situation.

The thesis is divided into two parts: first, a literature review throws light on different crucial aspects of women's lives and possibilities for transformation in Iran and other Muslim societies in relation to the forces of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation. While showing the richness and growing sophistications of an expanding field of study, the literature review also pointed out to a few significant lacunae or gaps in current research. Two such gaps stand out and are of the greatest relevance for this thesis, namely, the fact that the issues of women's emancipation and subjectivities are missing in most studies of Muslim women, as these studies tend to overwhelmingly focus on women's (often imposed rather than self-attributed) identities and on the anti-Western or anti-Islamic aspects thereof.

The second part of this thesis, a field study, seeks to fill in some of those gaps, particularly those concerning women's subjectivities and struggles for emancipation. In-depth semi-structured open-ended interviews with twenty-two Iranian women in Tehran from different social classes and backgrounds were conducted. The interviews, based on an interview guide designed so as to capture crucial aspects of women's subjective dispositions and strivings for emancipation, immediately brought out the critical importance of the opposition, missing in most studies, between capitalism and emancipation, and enabled the development of a two-dimensional framework based on two central oppositions: capitalism vs. emancipation on the horizontal axis or dimension, and modernity vs. tradition on the vertical one.

A more in-depth analysis of the interviews through the lens of the new framework allowed the identification of four main subjectivities carried by women and explain their emergence in terms of interaction effects between the four subjective determinations defining the framework (capitalism, modernity, emancipation and tradition): *Islamist subjectivity*, a statist form of religion in strong opposition to emancipatory feminism, *the subjectivity of desire for the West*, a fascination for individualism and a Western lifestyle and a denial of tradition, *traditionalist subjectivities*, a strong tendency to preserve all forms of traditions particularly religion and nationalism, and *emancipatory subjectivity*, although the latter only appears in this study in the form of modern emancipatory aspects and elements (with equality at their core) rather than a full-fledged ‘emancipatory subjectivity’.

Thanks to this form of analysis we have come to understand that women’s movements in Iran are more oriented towards ‘tackling Islamisation’ than ‘seeking equality’ or ‘challenging patriarchy’. It is on this basis that the thesis draws two of its main conclusions: firstly, that the opposition between capitalism and emancipation should be not only taken into account, but a major basis for any future studies on Muslim women; and, secondly, that the struggle against Islamisation cannot be separated from the struggles against social inequality and patriarchy.

## **Introduction: Aims, Approach and Methodology**

This thesis focuses on the position of women in Muslim countries, particularly Iranian women, their subordinate status in society and the prospects for their emancipation. The thesis is particularly concerned with women's efforts and struggles to challenge such status and achieve greater equality, including in terms of gender relations, and ultimately emancipation.

Twenty-two Iranian women were interviewed using an interview guide designed so as to bring out their desires and longings, essentially what they ultimately stand and strive for in their lives. The idea was to explore whether it was possible to identify distinct subjective patterns which would constitute specific subjectivities, a subjectivity being understood as a highly dynamic form of conviction and affect which drives an individual or group to conduct their lives in a relatively constant and consistent fashion.

The initial framework underpinning this thesis, 'initial' because it was the basis of the literature review undertaken in Part I, is the idea that women's position in the Muslim world is best understood in the context of the opposing but interdependent forces of capitalist globalisation or modernisation (often referred to in mainstream discourses simply as modernisation) and Islamisation, and that it is only by breaking the deadlock created by such intertwined, opposing and complicit all at once, forces that women can gain a political voice and change their current subordinate role. Beyond that, it is also suggested – and this is another major aspect of this thesis, because it is a recognition of the possible universality of women's struggles for emancipation – that the prospects for emancipatory change in Muslim societies are strongly dependent upon the position of women from all social classes and cultural backgrounds and thus upon women's prospects for emancipation.

However, precisely as a consequence of the literature review, this initial framework evolved towards one much more adequate to portray the dynamism and complexity of field which will be explained in due course. Suffice it to say that the evolved framework is a two-dimensional one and thus based on two major oppositions and four subjective determinations: *capitalism versus emancipation* (emancipation from patriarchal, religious and capitalist structures of domination or any liberation or emancipation which is involved in different ways and to different extents the idea of equality) and *modernity versus tradition* (to make explicit the relation to religion the latter may also be rendered as modernity/secularism versus tradition/religion).



Now out of this dynamic field of forces four main subjective forms or subjectivities may emerge, each one being essentially the result of the interplay of two subjective poles or determinations, although often maintaining links with the other two determinations, e.g. in the form of rejection. Thus, a subjectivity of desire for the West, reflecting the fascination for capitalist modernity, is the result of the interplay between capitalism and modernity, and it may involve a (strong) rejection of religion.

An Islamist subjectivity is likewise the result of the interplay between two determinations, capitalism and tradition-religion. Traditionalist subjectivities maintain a looser relation to emancipation (e.g. in the form of showing a certain care for others and even participating in help or charitable activities) but may also show a strong opposition to dogmatic or fundamentalist understandings of religion. Finally, emancipatory subjectivity is the result of the interplay between emancipation and modernity. The modernity at stake here is an emancipatory modernity, that is, a modernity radically opposite to the aforementioned capitalist modernity.

## **Aims**

The main aims of the thesis can be defined as follows:

- To set the context regarding the position of women in the Muslim world in relation to the forces that maintain them in a subordinate position in society, and the prospects for the emergence of emancipatory pathways for women and society at large.
- To review and survey the literature in order to both conceptually and empirically develop further, strengthen and sharpen this thesis' initial framework, itself grounded on existing theoretical approaches and empirical studies, while at the same time providing a theoretical overview, conceptual mappings and specific analyses of the most interesting and promising strands of that literature (most interesting and promising above all in terms of explanatory and interpretative capacity) with respect to women's current position and actual possibilities of improvement in an emancipatory direction.
- To undertake qualitative empirical research through case study methodology based on interviews with women in Iran. The purpose of the empirical research is essentially qualitative and conceptual in the sense that it seeks both to deepen understanding of women's

actual position in Iran, their struggles and the difficulties they face to change such position and to explore the prospects for women-led change in an emancipatory direction.

- To analyse the results of the interviews in order to explore whether it is possible to identify distinct subjective patterns which would constitute specific women's subjectivities, and to conceptualise the subjective field shaping such subjectivities, its dynamics and complexity.
- To draw conclusions about the political and social prospects of women's emancipation in Iran and to suggest in what ways such prospects can be extended to the Muslim world.

### **Approach**

The thesis begins by conceptualizing women's position in a dynamic way, so that such position is seen as existing in the midst of the interactions between two opposing but intertwined and even interlocked and complicit *forces*: capitalist globalisation or capitalist modernisation (variously referred to as modernisation, economic development and 'liberalisation', that is, the opening up of economic sectors or entire countries to multinational corporations and finance capital), and Islamisation, which in a broad sense includes Islamism, political Islam and what is often called Islamic fundamentalism..

In this way the theoretical framework is initially defined by the dynamic interplay between those two forces, capitalist modernisation and Islamisation, while women's efforts and struggles for emancipation are situated in the midst of that dynamics. I will argue that such forces cannot merely be perceived as *external* powers that influence women from the outside, but rather women as well as their movements are themselves 'carriers' of such forces. Women who seek emancipation or at least greater equality through Islam, through modernisation or through a tension-ridden combination of both, or against both, are the main cases in point. I would therefore rather see women's movements and emancipatory struggles as *traversed* by such forces than seeing them as being of 'one piece' or in any other essentialist way.

Such a framework also seeks to undo the identitarian illusion to which capitalism, tradition, and religion have fallen, and are indeed bound to fall, prey. For, contrary to what is claimed from any of such identitarian positions, they inhabit one another. This can also be expressed through the idea that "the West resides in 'us'", 'us' being Muslims, or Arabs or non-Westerners, an idea which immediately "becomes a question of *how* and *what sort of west* resides in "us", and '*what sort of*

“us” are we (Sabih, 2015, p. 89). To this fundamental idea I must add, so as to have the whole framework we try to outline here, the complementary and necessary move that *the East, or Islam resides in us, Westerners*, and all the implications concerning how and what sort of East or Islam resides in us, and what sort of ‘us’ we are.

This means that in this framework women’s identity is not conceptualised as a fixed state or as a substantive identity, but rather as a conflicting and differential relation which is being constructed and fought for in the aforementioned situation of opposing forces and conflicts. A major implication of this is that instead of identity, I would rather favour the much more dynamic and open concept of subjectivity (see Rancière 1992 and Badiou 2016a). In other words: instead of focusing on what people claim to, or are told they have to, *be* (an identity), this thesis is especially concerned with what people ultimately desire and strive for (a subjectivity).

The opposing relationship between capitalism and emancipation is worth further consideration. Characteristically, the capitalist system relies upon local forces to enter the markets of Muslim countries, which despite their anti-West manifestation, desire to secure their wealth through capitalist mechanisms and processes – this is perhaps the paradigmatic example of the complicities between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation, complicities which are undoubtedly lethal for women’s emancipation. Capitalism, with its consumption-oriented culture, is penetrating Muslim societies.

Finally, there is another crucial relationship between these two forces and the women’s efforts and emancipatory struggles that should be emphasised from the start: for capitalist modernisation and tradition present themselves (often the former as modernity and modernisation, the latter in conjunction with different forms of religion and nationalism) as carriers of a promise of improvement, authenticity and even liberation; not only that, but they are often engaged in bitter battles for women’s allegiance. A central idea of this thesis is that the actual liberation of women can be achieved only through breaking the deadlock created by such opposing, intertwined and complicit forces, and by women putting forward their own demands for emancipation without necessarily taking an anti-modern or an anti-Muslim standpoint – indeed, as we shall see in the field study, there can be an emancipatory modernity, and not only a capitalist modernity. The main struggle is not of women against Islam or the West, but of women, in Iran and other Muslim

countries, bonding with each other and with the whole society to end women's oppression and strive to construct a more equal society.

### **A relational framework to prevent all forms of essentialism**

The reasons why the two forces I am referring to are in no way a 'binary coupling', but two interdependent, complicit and mutually constituted forces which are conceptualised so as to precisely undo such binaries, will be further elaborated and explained in the introduction to the literature review (Part I). However it may be worth expounding here a major argument about why this initial framework is not a reproduction of any such binaries 'East and West', or 'Civilisation and Barbarianism' or 'Islamisation and modernisation'.

The dynamic framework of this thesis refuses to adopt any essentialist and substantialist approaches in elucidating social relations, movements and groups. The two most prominent essentialised totalities in this field are precisely 'Islam' and 'woman'. There are various disputes around terms such as 'Islamism' (and derivatives like 'Islamist'), 'fundamentalism' (and 'fundamentalist'), which in the West are routinely associated not only with 'terrorism', but with a sort of primordial and enduring barbarianism. 'Islamisation' is much more adequate to my purposes, as it refers to a *process* which is also a goal of a number of Muslim movements and groups. But I am very aware that there is no way of definitely resolving this problem, as there are no terms which can do full justice to the phenomena they seek to grasp, nor are there terms in this field that can be totally devoid of controversy. In the Western media, in political speech as well as sometimes in academic work, Islam (and derivative terms) and freedom (and related allegedly Western values) are occasionally introduced as controversial discussions used to make contrary points. Against this tendency, I find extremely significant the directness with which Maxime Rodinson talks about what he calls "the crucial aspect" of his own approach, which is that he "refuse[s] to consider Islam as a conceptual totality, a system of ideas, of practices, of life choices which would be at the root, which would be the root or the kernel of all the behaviours, public and private, of the world which professes adherence to this religion" (1993, p.9).

Regarding 'woman', the essentialist debates bring Muslim women's dress codes together with Islamic practices. Veiling, for instance, which is known as one of the most prominent symbols of Islamic dress code from the orientalist discourse, has had several historical and cultural explanation rather than being a mere Islamic practice. In different Muslim countries, for instance,

the most common ‘hijab’ for Muslim women’s ranges from regular ‘headscarves’ to ‘chador’, ‘burqa’, ‘niqab’ and ‘khimar’ etc. which indicates different readings of Islam within particular cultures and countries (Soni 2013). This diversity in particular religious practices and customs is delicately reflected in a poem of Rumi, one of the most influential mystic Persian poets, where he declares that each person in my fond affections claimed a part and people became my associate from their ‘own opinions’ and ‘judgments’ (Nasr 1974).

Zohre Sullivan, in one of the few articles in the literature that is consonant with the framework of this thesis, formulates the problem in very apt terms:

In Iran’s conflicted efforts to construct national, revolutionary, and Islamic modernities the figure of the ‘woman’ has repeatedly been constituted as the *overdetermined sign of an essentialized totality*, as a metaphor for a besieged nation, an embattled self, a delicate interiority, the uncontrollable other, the ‘unpierced pearl’ to be bought and protected, or the sacred interior (Sullivan 1998, p. 228, emphasis added).

Although Sullivan refers to Iran, in truth her precise characterisation is clearly applicable not only to the Muslim world, but, with the addition of the appropriate metaphors (e.g. the Muslim woman as victim, or as mere object, not subject, and so forth), to the tension-laden relations between the Muslim world and the West, as well as to the innermost core of the Western world itself.

In this thesis, terms such as Islamism and Modernisation are used *relationally*, as the framework compels us to do, and I seek to draw out the full consequences of this approach, particularly in the sense that the processes and phenomena the terms seek to capture do not have existence as independent entities (essences or substances), but only exist in relation to, indeed *in opposition to* other processes and phenomena. I believe this is a fundamental task in any serious study of the Muslim countries: the task of de-substantialising, de-essentialising and de-totalising Muslim women and men, peoples, believers and lay persons, as well as Muslim cultures and countries. Such task is even more important when addressing the gender, female question in the Muslim world (but equally so in the Western world).

A first fundamental implication of this relational approach lies in understanding the fundamental connections between what is often called Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism and capitalist modernisation. As Abu-Lughod puts it: “The Islamists of today are often branded ‘medieval’ by their opponents. They themselves invoke the past and self-righteously denounce certain versions of modernity. And yet they are very much part of and a product of modernity”

(1998, p. 4). Such understanding cannot simply be something added on to the analysis, but inscribed from the beginning on the theoretical framework.

Further fundamental aspects of such relationality are brought out through Fethi Benslama's closely related concepts of 'between-two' and 'inter-section'. In the words of Ruth Mas:

Benslama's *entre-deux* [between-two] puts a finger on the Orientalist dichotomies of East/Islam and West, in order to carve out a space in the present for the historical recognition of the binary and violent logic of the relationship between France [we can equally read: the West] and the Maghreb [or more generally the Muslim world] within which Muslim Franco-Maghrebis have been trapped (2010, p. 277).

To carve out such a space for the recognition of women's position and struggles is what the framework of this thesis seeks above all to do, a task for which the concept of inter-section is also fundamental: "The intersections between European culture and Islamic culture are manifold, assuming we understand them in both senses of the Latin *intersectio*, that is, as a point that is simultaneously *encounter* and *division*" (Benslama 2009, p. ix, emphasis added). Disrupting that space, today more violent and deeply entrenched than ever, may well be both a necessary condition and a consequence of women's advancement in their struggles for emancipation.

## **Methodology**

Given the theoretical framework just outlined and the complex nature of the problem this thesis seeks to contribute to investigating, the thesis will rely on a strictly qualitative methodology based on the *case study* approach, as this is in principle best suited to gain a deeper understanding (Berg 2001) of the position of women in Iran as a setting. In line with Bryman's definition of this methodology, which involves detailed analysis of the complexity and particular nature of the case in question where the location of research is a focus of interest on its own, in the current study, Iran is chosen as a suitable setting for its "unique features" in relation to the framework of this thesis (2008, p.53). The current research employs a *representative* (Yin 1994) or as Bryman phrases it an *exemplifying* type of case study approach with Iran providing "a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered" (Bryman 2008, p.56).

Although many Muslim societies have experienced periods of modernisation and extreme Islamisation in one form or another, Iran represents what is probably one of the most prominent cases of these processes. The victory of Islamic Revolution after a period of intense Westernisation

of the country together with the re-secularisation of the society after the liberalisation of the markets make Iran a suitable case for investigating women's position in relation to Islamisation and capitalism. Moreover, despite the apparent anti-west position of the Iranian state, profit-oriented capitalism and a consumerist culture are being developed in the Iranian society, and even within the government institutions (Mahdi 2003) which forms another reason for choosing Iran as a suitable case.

As is well-known but may be useful to recall, the case study is not simply a data-gathering technique, but a methodological *approach* that can rely on a variety of information-gathering techniques, from ethnographic field-work through to interviews, discussion groups and different forms of documentation. In the present case this thesis will rely on interviews with Iranian women. Although I will expound the specific nature of the interview technique in chapter six, it seems fit to anticipate here that it is an *open* interview technique which, instead of following a pre-defined set of questions in a fixed order, it is based on an interview guide (see Appendix 2) aimed at facilitating as much as possible a spontaneous interview situation (as opposed to a situation completely separated from other social situations) and, in this context, favouring the interviewed women's spontaneous expression (and even discussion and deepening) of their views. Although the interviews began with "a similar opening or 'warm-up' question or topic", as each interview progressed, the issues that were brought up differed based on what the participants had "just been talking about" or the need to discuss a new topic (Mason 2002, p. 73).

The scope of the interviews is in principle rather broad, as it concerns the position of women in Iranian society, their desires and aspirations, and above all their difficulties and struggles to transform their subordinate status. It is within this broad context that a more specific focus has been defined; this is mainly centred on women's subjectivities, understood as formed around what they ultimately desire and strive for, sense of agency and participation in public life and social-political movements or initiatives. To have a clear sense of how women's position and struggles for emancipation have evolved and/or changed, those aspects are addressed in a historical manner by distinguishing (a distinction incorporated into the interview guide) three main periods around the Iranian Revolution: before, after and since the Revolution.

In this way, as will be explained in chapter six, this case study methodology does not exactly match the well-known distinction between exploratory, explanatory and descriptive case studies

(see, e.g. Yin 1994). Indeed this methodology combines fundamental aspects of all three types of case studies. First of all, it is exploratory in that it seeks to deepen understanding and gain new insights of a relatively unexplored problem: the evolution of women's subjectivities in Iran since the Iranian Revolution. In this respect, and as is usually the case with the case study approach as such, "it can easily serve as the breeding ground for insights and even hypotheses that may be pursued in subsequent studies" (Berg 2001, p. 231). Providing such a 'breeding ground', essentially through conceptual development which contributes to clarify and bring theoretical order to the field, is a central aim of this empirical research. But my field study also has an important explanatory intention, although this is not so much in terms of strict causality as in terms of explanatory logics that can account for phenomena. The descriptive aspect, lastly, is also fundamental and indeed unavoidable; in this respect, the theoretical framework outlined above is a good initial basis for achieving results at this descriptive level as well.

In terms of the distinction, also well-known in the literature, between intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies (Stake 1995), it is clear that the case study methodology in this thesis falls within both intrinsic and instrumental case studies, since it seeks both to understand aspects which are inherent or intrinsic to the situation of women and to refine the theoretical framework of this thesis. This is also consonant with the open recognition that in reality no solid line at all can be drawn between intrinsic and instrumental case studies (Berg 2001, p. 229).

In the end, although the current research has employed a case-study approach as its main methodological approach, hallmarks of *cross-sectional* design (Bryman 2008) can also be seen in its design. Referring to Bryman's definition of a cross-sectional research design – generating patterns that can be applied to other times and places – the results of the current research need not be limited to Iran and can be expected to be generalisable to other contexts, particularly in what concerns the fundamental dynamics found in the subjective field and the main subjective forms and oppositions. Nothing here is really surprising if we take into account the planetary reach of capitalism and the universality of emancipatory struggles that usually begin at very specific locations.



## PART I – LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction to a complex conceptual problem and an urgent task: Approach and methodology**

Scholarly discourses and debates on the position of women in Muslim countries (including what is often referred to in the literature as gender in the Middle East or in Muslim countries, Muslim women and Middle Eastern women) are plentiful and rather varied in theoretical approach, practical orientation and specific concerns. It is a field which, while “quite new”, is “developing rapidly” (Keddie 2007, 1) – indeed so rapidly that, as Charrad argues (but she is just an example among many), “the literature on women in the Middle East has exploded over the past four decades and especially since 2000” (2011, p. 418).

But this explosion of the literature has not merely involved a, let’s say, quantitative growth; it has simultaneously become a highly complex field, and this at several levels, including in disciplinary terms: “The study of gender in the Middle East has been dominated by anthropologists and historians, followed by women’s studies scholars, political scientists, and sociologists who represent a minority, albeit one that is growing” (Charrad, *ibid.*). The fact that sociology does not feature in any prominent way is relevant for this literature review and for the whole thesis as we will see below. The main consequence of this rapid growth in number of studies and the consequent complexification of the field is obviously “the *difficulty* of trying to bring together their [the existing literature] results” (Keddie, *ibid.*, emphasis added).

This is not just or not only the question of developing a sound narrative reflecting what is considered as acquired knowledge in the field and its main findings, but beyond that and above all a question concerning the *conceptual* difficulty of organising a very intricate field, a field riven by extant *political* issues, conflicts and tensions of the highest order which have certainly a strong influence in the literature itself. Such political conflicts, if anything, have only intensified in the last decades, precisely the period of rapid expansion of the literature. But this is not just a casual coincidence; far from that, it has to be said that, as is well-known, the expansion of the literature has to a large but most significant extent been determined by growing interest in the Muslim world and the Middle Eastern countries as a consequence of the intensification of the dramatic political conflicts taking place in those regions of the world. But Iran, it hardly needs saying, has been and

is at the core of those conflicts (as has and is Palestine) since much before, since the late seventies and the Iranian Revolution. This, together with internal conflicts in Iran itself, has certainly had direct implications in what concerns the position of Iranian women which I will address throughout this review, particularly in chapter four. Thus the expansion of the literature has taken place in the context of a weighted political context traversed by national and geopolitical entanglements (Abu-Lughod 2013). This also means that I am referring to a highly dynamic field in terms of both exponential growth of studies and greater theoretical and empirical sophistication of research.

We thus have a literature constituting a very broad, dynamic and intricate field. It is true that the existence of several edited collections or readings (including, to name those, among the most significant ones, on which I have drawn, Kandiyoti 1996; Abu-Lughod 1998; Saliba et al. 2002; Sajoo 2002; Cronin 2004; Moghissi 2005; Nouraie-Simone 2005; Yount and Rashad 2008; Roded 1999; and Kamrava 2011) is obviously of great help to try and review the field. Having said this, however, perhaps I should add that, in spite of these collections and a few review articles of a relatively general (as opposed to very specific and even overspecialised) character I have drawn on, the difficulty of putting conceptual order in the field continues to be very important and not significantly diminished by those studies and collections, very valuable otherwise – indeed one often has the impression that, far from contributing to conceptually clarifying the field as a whole, such collections expand it by opening up new approaches and bringing out new themes, thereby increasing its complexity.

From what I have argued so far it can be deduced that a *comprehensive* review of the literature on women in Muslim countries is an extremely laborious and complex task, one that, even if it can be conceived of as possible, I am not in a position to undertake. But perhaps such comprehensiveness is not needed after all, or not at this stage in the development of the field. In effect, once we have become more familiar with the field it is possible in retrospect to state that what is needed is rather bringing more conceptual clarity into the field – a task requiring both theory development and focused empirical fieldwork to ground that development. This thesis seeks to make a contribution to these two fundamental tasks. The thesis, while multidisciplinary, is mainly grounded in sociology. Now sociology is a discipline whose presence in the field is, as I have already indicated, not exactly marginal but surely not prominent at all. This fact stands in sharp contrast with the belief, shared by some scholars in the field, that sociology has something

relevant to offer – indeed something that, according to Charrad, is of great significance: “the theoretical level is an avenue for especially promising work in sociology” (2011, p. 430). My expectation is thus to contribute to realising that promise or that potential.

The first part of this thesis is therefore a *selective* review of the literature. Its *aim* is to selectively survey that literature in order to both conceptually and empirically develop further, strengthen and sharpen the initial framework, itself grounded on existing theoretical approaches and empirical studies, while at the same time providing a conceptual overview and specific analyses of the most interesting and promising strands of the literature (most interesting and promising above all in terms of explanatory and interpretative capacity). It is therefore that framework, whose central lines have been expounded in the introduction, which is used as the compass to navigate the literature and the criterion to select and single out specific studies for analysis.

A major aspect of the framework on the basis of which this literature review will be done, and aspect already addressed in the introduction, is that women’s efforts to challenge their subordinate status, as well as their struggles for emancipation, are seen as taking place in the midst of two antagonistic but intertwined, mutually implicated and complicit forces: capitalist modernisation and Islamisation. Another crucial aspect worth elaborating further concerns the relationship between these two forces, since it is not merely a connection between two elements that are external to one another, as in a binary opposition, but a relation of mutual implication which ultimately is *constitutive* of both forces. Zohreh Sullivan, in an approach reminiscent of the approach in this thesis in fundamental respects, puts it this way:

The binary between traditionalism and modernity [or, in our terms, between Islamisation and modernisation processes] that sometimes shapes conventional discussions of Iran and the Iranian Revolution is therefore inadequate to a model I prefer, that of the coexistence and tension of each in a *dialectical* (but not mutually exclusive) relationship with its alterity (Sullivan, 1998, p. 215, emphasis added).

I must emphasise in the strongest possible terms that this is not a *binary* opposition to be added to the many “conceptual binaries” typical of the “binary thinking” that Talal Asad has rightly targeted for critique in his book *Formations of the Secular* (2003, pp. 15 and 244). I am very aware that conceiving the relationship between those forces, as is rather frequent in the literature, in merely linear terms and according to a rather crude dynamics whereby two fully constituted (as

though fixed in their essences) civilisational, cultural and/or political forces or powers confront one another in an open and blunt clash, is not only inadequate and deeply flawed, but it contributes to reproduce the very mechanisms, dispositions and logics that so often pervade the conflicts between prominent representatives of those forces, e.g. their ruling groups and advocates. Indeed such binary order that, in a crude linear dynamics, “lines up Christianity, secularism, reason, tolerance, free thought and speech on one side, and Islam, fundamentalism, submission, intolerance, restricted thought and speech on the other” (Brown 2009, p. 8), a list to which several others binaries could be added, belongs to the way in which those very forces conceive of and present themselves to the world. Such binary oppositions, as George Shulman claims, “underpin the self-understanding of modernising elites and academics” (2006, p. 154), a correct but incomplete observation to which I have to add that they equally underpin the self-understanding of ‘Islamising’ elites and academics.

The extent to which the approach in the current research is not only totally opposed to that binary order but a theoretical tool to critique and unravel it, can be judged by the fact that, in this approach, women themselves are seen as often being *carriers* of those very forces of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation, even if (and sometimes particularly when) they are consciously opposed to them, with the tensions and conflicts that such carrying involves. This also means that the conflict, a conflict that according to the binary thinking is supposed to take place between two external forces, is or becomes an inner conflict affecting the core of women’s subjectivities in complex ways. In my understanding, to emphasise this once more, such forces are not only interdependent but mutually constituted and deeply “intertwined with one another in various modes of avowal and disavowal” (Butler 2009, p. 113). We can thus see that, in reality, such forces and the multiple binary oppositions they create and promote are, in Wendy Brown’s most apt appreciation, “fluctuating notions constituting a crucial domain of modern power and governance” (ibid.).

If this is so, if such forces in reality constitute the realm of contemporary power and domination and are fluctuating and capable of undergoing mutations, then no wonder that they criss-cross and traverse practically all the significant debates in the literature and particularly the main polemics in the field. This is so much so that often they are reproduced and/or recreated at

different levels and with newly found arguments – a very significant case in point being, as I will discuss later in the review, that of ‘Islamic feminism’ and the fervent polemics it has triggered.

I am persuaded that this framework, which will be further developed through both the literature review and the field work, can make a significant contribution to two major tasks which in reality are *preliminary* to, and thus somehow presupposed by, any sound research in the field of women in Muslim countries (obviously involving gender and feminism, but also social class). Following Charrad (2011), those tasks can be defined as, first of all, to contribute to disassembling and undoing the deep-rooted view, indeed the stereotype, of Muslim women or women in Muslim countries as passive, subordinate, helpless and victimised subjects; second, and inseparably from the first task, to contribute to undoing the idea of Islam, part of the binary order I have critiqued, as a fixed or monolithic entity which, in what concerns women, determines and shapes their condition in an identical or homogeneous way in all places and times. The significance of these preliminary tasks can be gathered by the fact that women have become a major object and site of dispute at many levels, internally and externally (including the national, macro-regional and geo-political ones), used to demarcate the conflicts, to attack the enemies and to defend oneself. But if this is so, this also means that the women and their emancipatory struggles are also a possible subject of hope – indeed a real subject of hope for anyone who upholds the idea of fundamental human equality.

The following review is structured, in part in keeping with major tendencies in the literature, into three main parts (although the third part is done through two chapters). The first part is focused on the deeply prejudiced view of Islam alone (‘Islam’ as a fixed identity or essence) as the culprit of the subordination of women or, on the contrary, as the only basis for women’s emancipation (chapter one of this thesis). I thus start with the simplistic but well-entrenched views, for even if there is a majority consensus nowadays in the literature against these views, I expect in this way to make explicit and manifest a major theoretical and research problem which is present not only in, say, the less sophisticated literature, but also in the more serious one. That is the reason I have entitled this first chapter thus: *Islam, women’s friend or women’s foe: A simplistic but deeply entrenched and prominent debate*.

The second part (chapter two of this thesis) addresses the heart of the problem, what I have called *the constitution and re-constitution of women, their bodies, assigned domains and ways of*

*life as a major site of struggle between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation.* Here we deal with different prominent manifestations of the interplay between Islamisation and capitalist globalisation, including the different social realms such as the domestic and public ones, the Islamisation versus modernisation of laws and legal systems, and the question of veiling, unveiling, and ‘re-veiling’.

The third part (chapters three and four) focuses on women themselves, particularly on their subjectivities and agency, two central issues in the problem I am addressing in this thesis. However, whilst in the latter, agency, is very prominent in the literature that is not at all the case of the former, the subjectivities. The significance of addressing these two aspects together will be shown through the review and analyses of the literature. But I should already say that there seems to have emerged a renewed critical debate among the authors who “explore possible subject positions that are available to minoritized Muslim women”, ask “how these positionings relate to different ‘feminisms’ and questions of gender justice”, and “explore a wide spectrum of positions, including Muslim women's cultivation of pious sensibilities” as well as “the cultivation of ‘secular’ sensibilities” (Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen and Malik 2011, p.1).

A major structuring aspect of this part lies precisely in the three main fields or domains of women’s subjectivity and agency I have identified in the literature:

- Everyday forms of subjectivity, agency and resistance.
- Different forms of feminism, as they seek to find ways of both thinking through women’s agency and providing avenues for broad life orientation and even in terms of forms of organisation.
- Organised and/or militant agency through women’s Islamist movements and associations.

The third part is divided into two chapters: while chapter three reviews women’s agency in the Middle East, chapter four is specifically focused on women in Iran. Chapter four is thus an analysis of women’s movements and emancipatory struggles in Iran under the influence of the 1979 Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and capitalist market developments.

Finally, Chapter five provides an overview of the whole of Part I which in addition examines studies on Muslim women's subjectivities which have some significant similarities with my own field study. This is an important chapter which, as its very title indicates (By Way of Conclusion: Towards a Framework to Study Women's Subjective Field in Iran) makes the transition, so to put it, between the literature review and the field study. In thus doing, the chapter develops further, deepens and modifies the framework by explicitly arguing that the opposition between Islamisation and capitalist modernisation is a false opposition and that the real oppositions are, first of all, that between capitalism and emancipation, and then that between modernity and tradition. The new framework is based on that twofold opposition, as we shall see in Part II of the thesis.

## **Chapter 1: Islam, women's friend or women's foe: A simplistic but deeply entrenched and prominent debate**

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, from the advent of Islam in the seventh century until today, women have been – like they have in the Christian world – subordinate to men. Documentations concerning the Middle Eastern women from pre-Islamic times until about the fourteenth century as Keddie (2007) argues, are scarce and generally reflect views of elite men about women rather than direct material about how women lived and thought. However, as she further argues, the available evidence shows that patriarchal structures have existed for centuries in various forms in the Middle East.

In the last few decades, historians, researchers and the scholars in the areas of Islam and Middle Eastern studies have raised the question about whether it was Islam that systematised patriarchy and gave it a divine legitimacy or if the existing patriarchal thinking of Arabia shaped the foundations of Islam. In other words, it is not clear yet whether it was Islam that institutionalised patriarchy in the Arab societies and gave it a new systematic life or, on the contrary, Islamic doctrine was well adapted to the needs and attitudes of Arabia's pre-Islamic society and therefore, was widely accepted by the Arabs.

Scholars of different backgrounds have addressed these questions in different ways. Some believe that, Islam *promoted* women's status arguing that the Quran addresses men and women equally and has put women in a divine and godly equality with men, a position that they had never experienced before (Khan 1988). Amini (2006), for instance, argues that there is not a single verse in the Quran that degrades women. Quranic verses such as verse 35, Chapter Al-Ahzab in which women and men are equally addressed for their duties and punishment, Khan (2005) argues, are particularly used by such scholars to justify their arguments:

Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, steadfast men and steadfast women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give alms, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who remember God much, for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward (Khan 2005, p.12).

Comparing the portrayals of women in pre and after Islam Arab societies, the pro-Islam scholars often indicate that Islam revived women's rights in the male dominated Arab societies where women had no rights and were treated as properties (Syed 2004). Jawad (1998), for instance, holds the view that Islam promoted women's status in Arab societies as firstly, it allowed Muslim



men to have up to four wives while they could have ‘as many wives as they could’ before Islam and secondly, women were given inheritance right by Islam whereas before that they had no such right. Al-Sheha (2000) similarly suggests that women of the pre-Islamic Arab society were exposed to different kind of humiliation. Fathers in the pre-Islamic era of Arabia, Al-Sheha writes, became disgraced with the birth of a female child into their families and buried them alive. Others (Badawi 1980) even go as far as claiming that while situation of women in pre-Islamic civilisations including Hindi, Athenian and Roman women was humiliating, Islam brought about freedom and out-worldly equality for women.

On the other side are scholars who link the subordinate status of women in Muslim societies to Islam. This ethnocentric disparaging of Islam as backward has particularly been practiced by European scholars, among them is the influential French historian Ernest Renan (1883). In his lecture at the Sorbonne University, Renan stated that “Islam is far removed from anything that could be called rationalism or science” (1883, p.3). Partly in continuity with this Eurocentric perspective, there are contemporary scholars who believe that Islam *limited* the freedom of women and their social roles.

Madigan (2011), for instance, rejects the role of Islam as a saviour of women of pre-Islamic societies arguing that women in pre-Islamic Arabia had different statuses – some had higher positions and some had lower – and among them were women who were active participants and even traders and leaders. Khadija, the first wife of Muhammad, Madigan argues, was herself a wealthy widow and a trader before her marriage to Muhammad. Other scholars of this camp refer to those Quranic verses in which women and men don’t have equal roles in society. Baden writes as such:

However, the Quran ascribes different social roles to men and women, as a consequence of their different natures [...]. Within marriage, women's role in the domestic sphere is emphasized and other activities are permissible only in as much as they do not conflict with family obligations. Men are cast as providers for and protectors of the family, including children and wives but also female relatives (1992, p.4).

As a matter of fact these views have clear historical roots. They continue a tradition which goes back to the literature written by several Europeans and mostly Christian clerics who in the middle Ages came into contact with Middle Eastern Islamic society and devoted parts of their travel books to the seclusion of women and practices such as polygamy and concubinage (Roded 1999). These scholars, Roded discusses, show particular interest in the verse 223 in the second

chapter of the Quran in which women are referred to as men's tillage and that men could go unto their tillage in whatever manner they wanted. Taking the implied meaning of the verse as an allowance to 'varying sexual positions', these scholars thus accused Islam of permitting and even encouraging unnatural sexual intercourses (Roded 1999). Authors such as Svensson (2000) similarly criticise Islamic family laws for being determined by formal religious affiliation rather than international human rights:

Law in the context of family laws in most Muslim countries [...] has a connection with the notion of the divine will, eternal and unchangeable. God has once and for all decided upon the 'divine law', the Sharia, [and] the role of human beings is [...] to discover and apply it (Svensson 2000, p.41).

The first issues with the above arguments is the attempt in them to present a static image of Islam or what Mir-Hosseini describes as "glorifying a faith without acknowledging the horrors and abuses that are committed in its name or condemning it by equating it with those abuses" (2006, p.632). Islam in above debates is discussed as an independent entity with a constant and immutable identity which adhering to it can either 'suppress' or 'save' women. This substantive view needs be rejected and Islam should be considered as a dynamic social force that its cores (Quran, Sunna and Hadith) have for centuries been subject to different readings and interpretations.

Quran as the primary written source for Islam has been a subject of controversy throughout the centuries. There are verses in the Quran which are particularly written in such a way that different individuals can have their desired readings and interpretations:

No less crucial are the classical, modernist and feminist interpretations of the opening phrase of verse 34, [...] 'Men are in charge of women' [...]. Classical exegesis explained this phrase as superiority of men over women [...]. The modernist Muslim translator and commentator A. Yusuf Ali renders the phrase: 'Men are the protector and maintainers of women.' The Muslim feminist Azizah Al-Hibri takes the definition [...] one step further to the concept of moral guidance and caring (Roded 1999, p.28).

The other two cores of Islam, Sunna (the way of life of the prophet) and Hadith (sayings of Muhammad and his descendants), are similarly argued to be sources of disagreement. A reason for such disputes, Rodinson (1993) claims, is that Muhammad's fundamental message has been significantly influenced after his death by, firstly, the culture of pre-Islamic Arabia and secondly, different cultures and economic systems of the countries that were subjugated by Muslims. It was

this *tremendous intermingling* between the Arab culture and the culture of other societies that, as Rodinson indicates, led to a gradual transformation in Islam. Baden (1992) reminds us that Islamic texts containing patriarchal practices different from Muhammad's ethical teachings formed the basis for the legal systems in Muslim societies as early as Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (661-750 AD and 750-1250 AD respectively). These series of historical events represent the dynamic, living and therefore at least in part, adaptable nature of Islam.

Another major weakness of the debates of the both camps is their failure to make a distinction between *Islamic faith* and *organised religion* (institutions, laws and practices) (Mir-Hosseini 2006). A major aspect of these debates lies in the lack of distinction, as Rodinson argues, between the 'Islam's world' which is Muhammad's original message and the doctrines attached to this message and the 'Muslim world' which is the political, social and cultural structures of Muslim societies. For Rodinson (1993), thus, the ideological structures of Muslim societies are responsible for what is understood as Islam outside the Muslim world and creating different versions of Islam all over the Muslim world.

In short, overemphasising the role of Islam in determining the situation of women in the Muslim societies, be it positively or negatively, not only prevents us from looking at the more fundamental social contradictions that often use religion as a weapon/instrument but also makes it very difficult to break with a static view of societies and the peoples who would not provide much space for change (Moghadam 1993). As will be discussed in the coming chapters, although patriarchy in its traditional form has long existed in Muslim societies, it is now well established and institutionalised in its modern form due to the dynamics of capitalist globalisation and Islamisation.

## **Chapter 2: The constitution and re-constitution of women, their bodies, assigned domains and ways of life as a major site of struggle between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation**

### **The selective nature of modernisation and Islamisation processes**

Leaving aside the issue of how Islam has considered and treated women, in the current section two major aspects of the dialectical relationship between Islamisation and capitalist modernisation will be explored. First, the *selective nature of modernisation* and the circumstances under which Islamism has grown in the Middle East through will be investigated through examining three important studies: Robinson's theory of structural versus subjective secularisation (secularisation which can be a major aspect of modernisation), Mersini's study of the major consequences of selective modernising processes, and Sharabi's idea of neo-patriarchy. Second, the *selective Islamisation*, a secularisation trend within Islamist movements as a counter-reaction to selective modernisation will be discussed through reviewing recent studies, above all Göle's notable work. These studies are chosen here due to their fundamental contribution to the exploration of the modernisation dynamics and their significant relevance to the framework of this thesis.

First is Francis Robinson (1999) whose work deals with partial modernisation processes in the Middle East. After the implementation of modernisation projects, Robinson argues, although *structural secularisation*<sup>1</sup> – to mean the removal of religion from the society's institutions – occurred in several Middle Eastern societies, *subjective secularisation* – that is, the process of weakening the importance of religion in the consciousness of the people – had not taken place in these societies. Robinson's viewpoint, which relies on Max Weber's account of *religious disenchantment*, is particularly useful in analysing processes of secularisation in countries such as Iran and Turkey during the post-colonial period. In both countries, as Robinson suggests, secularisation took place within the public sphere without engaging with society's general beliefs or controlling people's private lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Secularisation, particularly in the form of what has been called the 'secularisation thesis', has become a very disputed concept, so much so that it has been declared incompatible with empirical evidence (see e.g. Stark, 1999). Peter Berger is the proponent of the secularisation thesis; Berger refers to the subjective side of secularisation and argues that "As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularization of consciousness" (1967, p. 107). We cannot enter into this debate, although we are of course very aware of the problem the secularisation thesis poses.

In Turkey, the emphasis on the institutionalisation of secularisation was particularly so intense that ‘all signs’ of traditions and religion were considered uncivilised, backward and uneducated and attempts were made to eliminate them from the public sphere (Cinar 2008). In Iran, similar processes were taking place to secularise people’s appearance. Reza Shah, for instance, tried to civilise tribes by stripping their chiefs of traditional clothing and banned hijab for all women (Abrahamian 2008). Robinson points out that while this form of secularisation, understood as the withdrawal of religion from the public realm, is a central aspect of modernisation, it does in no way guarantee that a process of ‘subjective secularisation’ will also take place. This is mainly due to the fact that subjective secularisation appears to involve much deeper subjective layers, as well as fundamental cultural changes, and not simply changes in the external structures. There is, however, much more to these processes, as subjective secularisation could trigger what we may call a countermove of a seemingly religious nature, e.g. in the form of subjective *sacralisation* or *re-sacralisation*.

Fatima Mernissi (1996) deals with what she calls the ‘identity’ politics and problems that arise as a consequence of rapid modernisation. A key aspect of Mernissi’s argument is that the rapid shift from traditional to modern outlooks based on Western patterns – along with a rise of consumerism and changes in gender roles – leads to ‘identity problems’ in Muslim societies, and a feeling among some men, that their ‘Muslim self’ is being threatened by the invasive Western culture. In other words, she argues that the feeling of losing one’s identity produces a defensive mechanism which in its extreme form will lead to the emergence of fundamentalist Islamists<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the rise of Islamisation, as Mernissi claims, stems from the Islamists’ ‘proclamation for identity’ rather than an obsession with Islam. An example of this, Mernissis argues, is the strong objections to unveiling by Islamists, who treated veiling as ‘a notable part of the Muslim identity’, so that the more women remove their veils, the stronger the Islamists call for a return of the veil.

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<sup>2</sup> Factors such as ‘failure of socialist movements in social justice’, ‘incapability of Arab nationalism to stand up against imperialism’ and the ‘decline of the Communists following the collapse of Stalinism’ have played a significant role in the construction of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East (Lucas and Aimee 1998, Wrack 1993). Wrack states that the above factors together with “the impasse of capitalism in the region” has led the sections of the working class and peasantry to look to the “various Islamic organizations as a vehicle for change” (1993, p.3).

Hisham Sharabi's (1988) work studies the opposition between tradition (with religion at its core) and modernity across many Middle Eastern societies in three phases. The first phase of opposition that he demonstrates is the *development of neo-patriarchal structures* (modernised in technical, economic and administrative terms but even more biased towards the old patriarchal gender roles than before) as the first phase of that opposition. A neo-patriarchal system, he points out, is a social formation full of inner contradictions which, despite having modern public appearances, represents a social and economic infrastructure which is underdeveloped. In Sharabi's account, neo-patriarchal societies (contrary to what they tend to believe) suffer from a sort of 'hybrid' arrangement which is inclined to achieve economic growth using market-based forces, but at the same time tries to keep and even 'promote' its traditional values – including gender rules.

The second phase in this opposition which seems to have been crucial in the evolution of contemporary Middle Eastern societies (mainly Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria) is the emergence of fundamentalist Islam, a direct product of the development of neo-patriarchal structures. Islamism, which is in favour of embodying what it considers true Islam, constitutes a mass grassroots movement which was to dominate “the subsequent phases of neo-patriarchal society” (Sharabi 1988, p.10). The third phase in Sharabi's account is the disintegration of neo-patriarchal structures and the establishment of an oppressive new patriarchal structure: as the Islamism trend “violently brings down neopatriarchal society (or ineluctably decomposes it from within) it will inexorably retreat toward authoritarian patriarchy” (1988, p.11). Speaking of weakness and disintegration of contemporary neo-patriarchal societies, Sharabi sees a dismantling of neo-patriarchal systems inevitable:

Neopatriarchy, as the negation of both authenticity and modernity, stands a good chance of being dismantled or overwhelmed by the activity of critical modernity as well as militant fundamentalism (1988, p.13)

The common thread between Robinson, Mernissi and Sharabi's arguments is that in the transformation of a pre-modern society into a modern one, socio-cultural and economic domains are not affected equally and this might result in an emergence of anti-modern elements mainly in the form of Islamism. In other words, every aspect of selective modernisation brings immediately and visibly into play a complex and conflicting dynamic between the forces pushing for

modernisation and the forces pushing for Islamisation. In the same vein, Rodinson (1993) and Blaydes and Linzer (2008) argue that modernisation projects have been strengthening Islamism among Muslim societies by pushing Muslims closer to the sharia than they were before. In Algeria, Rodinson writes, the deposition of Ahmed Ben Bella following Boumedienne's coup, was a result of his secular endeavours which stirred up dissatisfaction among many Muslim men.

What is missed or not sufficiently considered in the above studies are the changes that the Islamist structures have gone through. Although Sharabi's work was published in the Mid-eighties, this study fails to consider something that was already clear by then, namely: that most moves in these matters tend to trigger countermoves, so that a selective modernisation often involves a selective Islamisation. A significant analysis and discussion on the subject was presented by Nilüfer Göle (2002). Göle's work focuses on an increase in individuality among Muslims following Islamisation processes that took place in Muslim societies. A secularisation process, Göle notes, often takes place after a revolutionary Islamisation phase – an intensive “quest for an Islamic collective identity, and the implementation of a political and religious rule” (2002, p.174). Göle refers to this secularisation processes as the post-revolutionary phase, when ideological revolutionary attitudes “get acquainted with values of individuation, professionalism, and consumerism”, and modern elements start to blend with the Islamic identity (2002, p.174). The second wave Islamists, as Göle argues, “use global communication networks, [...] follow consumption patterns, learn market rules, [and] enter into secular time” (2002, p.174).

One recent trend within many Muslim societies which confirms the notion of selective Islamisation is the formation of *pious markets*, markets with neo-liberal economic rules to sell commodities that promote an Islamic lifestyle (Gokarıksel and McLarney 2010). Göle's claim is thus strongly supported by this development, for such pious markets represent, contrary to appearances, the triumph of capitalism, which can sell even a good Islamic way of life, against any substantive Islamisation. There have also emerged numerous fashion magazines, films, novels, and clothes stores in response to the rising demands of the recently formed Muslim middle classes (Göle 2002). These commodities are designed to advertise a new form of “Muslim womanhood” that as Gokarıksel and McLarney write, combines “Islamic teachings and practices” with new (and old) conceptions of piety, beauty, fashion, lifestyle, motherhood, professionalism, and citizenship (2010, p.2).

Nawal El-Saadawi has described this alliance of Western capitalism and Islamisation in Egypt in a very apt fashion: “[i]t has become quite common to see a dignified religious scholar speaking on the television about the importance of veiling women, to be followed immediately by a half-naked dancer singing a commercial advertisement for American shampoo” (1988, p.13).

Post-revolution Iran is a classic example of where selective Islamisation happened. Despite the Iranian state’s policies on Islamisation of the public sphere and de-feminisation of the labour force in the first decade after the Islamic Revolution, a reversed trend, Behdad and Nomani (2012) argue, took place in the second decade after the Revolution. In this second decade, the state issued a new policy of economic liberalisation that allowed women to access more work and education opportunities. Haghghat-Sordellini (2013) argues that Middle Eastern women (in Iran and Lebanon) are integrated into the socio-economic development of their countries during times of capitalist expansion, but whenever there is an economic stagnation leading to a shortage of jobs, inflation, and high unemployment rates, then governments move to advocate Islamic family roles and traditional values; men are given priority in the labour market and women are left with limited options for gaining social status. Such policy is normally reinforced by religious leaders through issuing fatwas (religious rulings) claiming that prohibiting women from the public sphere, rather than being an economic issue, is to preserve traditional and Islamic family values (Haghghat-Sordellini 2013).

Understanding the selective nature of both modernisation and Islamisation processes, and the mutual entanglements between both processes, is central to this research for it rejects the existing propaganda concerning the supposedly irreconcilable opposition between these forces. We have come to the realisation that modernisation and Islamisation deliberately take aspects from each other when they are deemed beneficial, whilst rejecting those other aspects that are inconvenient. It also became apparent that selective secularisation does not imply a disappearance of religion but, as Göle rightly points out, “Islam penetrates even more into the social fiber” (2002, p.174). In what concerns women’s positions more specifically, roles and functions under these modernisation and Islamisation processes, the above evidence and analysis show that women’s fate, unsurprisingly, is subjected to the same entanglements as the processes themselves, so that women may undergo different waves and counter waves of labour market access or restriction, veiling or unveiling, or similar kinds of dynamics.



## **The drastic separation between the domestic and the public realms and the confinement of women to the former**

Following the entrance of Muslim women into the projects of modernity in the nineteenth century (Ilkkaracan 2008), the discourses and debates on modernity in Muslim contexts become rather more complex and highly politicised. Much of the current literature on Muslim women pays particular attention to the position of women and their bodies in relation to the struggles between Islamisation and Western domination. Keddi, for instance, sees the lower status of women in the Middle East as a direct product of such political struggles: “[Middle Eastern] women were and are [still] used in a game that is really more about politico-ideological question, including relations with the West, than about women per se” (2007, p.215). This view is supported by Bryan (2012) who suggests that in order to understand the position of Muslim women we can only situate it within the ‘hybrid’ space that combines the two forces of modernisation and Islamisation.

Many authors have focused particularly on the status of women in a historical context and linked the increasing patriarchy in Muslim societies to the struggles between Western colonisers and Muslim men. Tucker (1993), for instance, argues that the European colonial and imperialist powers used claims in favour of the ‘advancement of women’ to justify their intervention and rule which generated resistance among Muslim societies. Keddie (2007) similarly writes that, for the Muslim Middle Eastern men with much of their economy and politics taken over by Westerners, the household domain and women’s bodies were considered as the last sphere of defence against Western hegemony. In Egypt, Keddie argues, veiling increased after the French came with Napoleon or under the French colonisation in Algeria; women became potent symbols of ‘national authenticity’ against the French’s ‘modernisation’ efforts (Megahed and Lack 2011).

Much of the current literature on the position of women in Muslim societies pays particular attention to the impact of modernisation processes and the increasing presence of women in the public sphere and how it impacts the power relation in families. The separation of the public and private realms has been one longstanding contract within the social structure of Middle Eastern societies, and indeed of many other societies throughout the world, which associates men to the public sphere and the women to the private sphere. Sadiqi and Ennaji (2006) draw our attention to a number of important features of these two spaces in patriarchal societies.

First, the private sphere has historically been subordinate to the public sphere due to certain traditional social contracts. While the latter is “the place of power” where the social constraints are produced, businesses are led, the state is run, and economy is controlled, the former is where “this power is exercised” (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, p.88). This contract is considered so robust that although women are allowed to enter public places, their prolonged presence is not accepted – the same taboo applies to men’s presence in the kitchen. The second feature, which is more important in the context of our research is that it is in the dynamic interaction between these two spaces that gender identities are constructed and the power is negotiated (2006, p.88).

One common concern in such studies is whether or not the processes of modernisation, which are supposed to bring with them claims for women’s emancipation, could actually result in enhancing women’s presence in the public sphere and whether this presence could contribute to women’s emancipation (since providing more power means just that, more power, and has nothing whatsoever at all to do with emancipation). El-Saadawi (1988), has examined the gender roles in patriarchal structures and how the division between the contemporary social life of Middle Eastern women on one hand and the moral and cultural values of their societies on the other hand has created a ‘schizophrenia’ in Muslim women’s lives. An Arab man, she writes, is expected by his society to “rule over his wife, to dominate her, to cater to her needs financially, and not to allow her to mix with other men in offices, on the street or in a public transport” (1980, p.287). El-Saadawi (1980) argues that a resort to liberal ways such as increasing education and employment opportunities for women, although might increase women’s presence in the public sphere, neither challenges the patriarchy nor does it increase women’s chances for attaining emancipation. For instance, an educated professional woman in a country like Egypt still needs to seek permission from either her husband or father to leave the house and/or how to spend her income (El-Saadawi 1980).

Skalli (2006), (Moghadam 1993), and Joseph (in an interview with Stork 1997) similarly hold the view that women’s recent increase in access to the public sphere due to the expansion of capitalist markets in the Muslim world does not guarantee gender equality or even women’s higher politico-economic rights and sometimes it actually increases the controls that societies have traditionally exercised over women’s bodies. The battle between modernity and patriarchy, Moghadam argues, places Middle Eastern women in an almost impossible position, torn between

the public realm and the sphere of home and family life. Joseph particularly writes that selective freedoms that modernisation brought to Muslim women neither led to more freedom or autonomy for women, nor freed the female body from the traditional constraints:

There was patriarchy in the Arab world prior to colonization but there was much greater fluidity to the patriarchy that existed before. Contemporary representations of the Arab world often depict more rigid gender hierarchies, greater exclusion of women from public domains, and new controls over women to an extreme degree in some states. (Joseph in an interview with Stork 1997, p.65).

Ismail (2007) and Göle (2002) have examined the visual aspects of modernisation of the public sphere in modernised Turkey. Both scholars believe that women's clothing, way of walking and even places where they socialise e.g. school, mosque, cinema or beach, play a central role in the processes of Westernisation and re-Islamisation of the public sphere, so much so that a piece of clothing can sometimes function as a sign of modern or Islamic identity. This development of the secular public sphere can particularly be seen in Turkey, Iran and Egypt where the banishment of certain signs and markers - like the veil - was enacted as a form of a secularising and modernising rite of passage (Ismail 2007). In Iran, for instance, all forms of veiling were banned by Reza Shah in 1936, due to being considered incompatible with his modernising ambitions (Sullivan 1998). Göle uses the term *the secularisation of public place* to refer to the processes that institutionalise and imagine the public sphere as "a site for the implementation of a secular and progressive way of life" (2002, p.176). This can be seen in Turkey for instance, where women being brought into the streets with Western outfits was the quickest way to make the state's projects of modernisation more noticed:

images of women 'emancipated' from the confines of the veil and the harem, with a solid presence in the public sphere, engaged in modern activity, and wearing Western clothing, enabled the new Turkish state to distance itself from the 'barbaric' ways of the Ottomans and Islam and to align itself with Europe (Cinar 2008, p.900)

There is also a large volume of published studies on the growth of Islamism in public places as a counter reaction to modernisation processes (Ismail 2007, Cinar 2008, and Göle 2002). Kandiyoti (1991) and Zakaria (1988) deal with the position of women in traditional structures and whether the release of women from these traditional gender roles has resulted in the growth of Islamism. Kandiyoti reflects on the communal point of view over women's motherhood role in

Muslim contexts: “[Muslim] women bear the burden of being ‘mothers of the nation’ (a duty that gets ideologically defined to suit official priorities), as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference” (1991, p.2). Kandyoti’s argument sheds light on at least two matters: first of all, Muslim women, are the core foundation of the family, they are expected to stay in the private sphere and raise the ‘next generation of the Muslims’. Such a perspective associates a woman’s value to her associations with men. Secondly, any factors that diminish women’s reproductive roles or allegedly puts the foundations of the family at risk is strongly rejected by Muslim societies.

This view is supported by Zakaria (1988), who writes that for Islamic fundamentalists, women as the ‘essence of family’ ought to be covered and protected from the *other men*, those who do not belong to the domestic domain. It is such views, Blaydes and Linzer (2008) argue, that places an extreme emphasis on women’s ‘dignity’ and ‘morality’ in Muslim societies as a woman’s chastity is considered as the symbol of a man’s honour and reputation. Together, these studies indicate that women’s enhanced presence in the public sphere (which reduces the time they spend in their homes) is incompatible with the motherhood/wifedom roles that have traditionally been assigned for women, and that in addition it increases the chance of mingling with other men and these two together cause resistance among men.

Moghadam (1993), Ismail (2007), and Najmabadi (2005) identify the changes in power relation between private and public spheres as the major reason for the creation of resistance in men in Muslim societies and an emergence of Islamism. The mass education that was provided for women as a result of capitalist expansion in many Middle Eastern countries, Moghadam argues, has been leading to the growth of a ‘new middle class’ among women; a *new female identity* or a generation of educated women that has created in men the feeling of losing authority over the previously established power relations. Ismail similarly holds the view that the increased participation of women as workers in the public space (which entails women’s greater self-assertion) undermines constructs of the masculine self as provider.

Najmabadi provides us with important insights into women’s increasing presence in public spheres in the Iranian society. As a result of the modernisation processes, Najmabadi admits, the “female body (which was previously fitted into private spaces) entered into the public sphere

(which was previously controlled by men) which could put an end to men's absolute domination over public realm as well as women" (2005, p. 153). A result of this conflictual situation for women was "the regulatory harassment of men who would not surrender the privileged masculinity of the streets" (Najmabadi 2005, p. 153). Thus, despite veil being removed from women's hair in public places and their presence in social activities encouraged, their voice had to be veiled, and unwritten policing of women's social behaviour was produced to discipline this presence (Najmabadi 2005).

Ismail (2007) and Göle (2002) examine a *re-Islamisation* of the public sphere in Turkey in order to better understand the processes through which Islamic traditions are brought back to the various domains of social life which were previously dominated by secular elements. During such processes of the re-Islamisation of the public sphere, which work as a counter reaction to modernisation processes, Islam finds its way, Ismail argues, from the private to the public sphere and Islamists learn how to bring to the public sphere a sense of 'what it means to be Muslim'. Although re-Islamisation involves a strong rejection of existing models and signs that were relied on by the opposite force, Islamists might even make use of selective practices or symbols that belong to the secular public sphere in order to highlight the visual signifiers standing for real Islam or Muslims (Ismail 2007).

In a similar way, they have been used in the processes of secularisation of public spaces; women's bodies have apparently been a key factor in boosting the re-Islamisation of these spaces. In Turkey, for instance, Islamist women started sharing the same spaces of modernity, such as parliament, university classes, television programs, beaches, opera halls, and coffeehouses as a matter of public self-presentation:

The covered woman deputy walking into the Turkish Parliament and walking out the same day serves as an icon: an image that crystallizes the tensions emanating from two different cultural programs in the making of the self and the public (Göle 2002, p. 177)

Let us, by way of summary, restate that the division of the public and private realms is inseparable from all patriarchal structures. In these structures men are traditionally seen as the providers who dominate the public sphere (where power exists) whereas women, 'the powerless', belong to the private realm where children are raised. The expansion of capitalist markets and the implementation of modernisation projects paved women's way to enter the public sphere and provided them with more chances in terms of jobs and education. These changes have transformed the patriarchal gender roles in different ways and have created resistance among Muslim men. In

societies with restrictive modernisation processes, the secularisation of public places normally triggers counter-reactions in the form of a re-Islamisation of such places where Islamists try to re-fashion an Islamic self in the public sphere mainly by using women's bodies.

### **Modernisation and Islamisation of the laws, legal systems and the political arenas**

The current section will discuss how the back-and-forth relationship of Islamisation and capitalist modernisation has influenced first, the legal systems and second, women's participation in political arenas as much as any other areas of lives of women in the Middle Eastern societies. Although the existence of laws and judicial systems in the Middle East are a manifestation of modernity, they can be, however, among the most powerful mechanisms by which patriarchal systems take control over female sexuality and women's bodies. Since the 1980s and early 1990s a *rapid Islamisation* took place in the legal systems in many Muslim societies – particularly in the laws related to gender equality and sexual autonomy – after and as an extreme counter-reaction to a long period of pursuing a state modernisation and liberalising agenda in these countries (Ilkharacan 2008). These generally restrictive and radical changes took place at the *state* (in Yemen, Iran and Pakistan) or *local government* levels (in Tunisia). In Yemen, as Yadav (2010) argues, after coming to the power of the Islah Party in 1993, Islahi leaders immediately contributed a sharia-based reform to the constitution of the country which was followed by a series of legal reforms, particularly in previously secularised legal practices.

Burki refers to the enormous Islamisation of the legal system in Iran as “shariahization” (2014, p.2). He suggests two main features for these processes. First of all, sharia itself was not the main concern in shariaisation and instead the real focus was the rejection of the Western models and undoing the secular family laws enacted in the Pahlavi period. For instance, the Shah's 1967 Family Protection Law in particular had contradicted the sharia on a number of sensitive issues and this led to sharp protests among ulama and Ayatollah Khomeini himself who declared that these laws are against the whole of Iran and Islam: (to mention a few). It stipulated that men could not divorce their wives without giving valid reasons to family courts or enter polygamous marriages without written permission from previous wives; that wives had the right to petition for divorce and could work outside the home without the permission of their husbands (Abrahamian 2008). The second feature of shariaisation in Iran in Burki's account was that the Islamisation of

legal systems did not happen in all areas equally and that a majority of those changes took place in family laws and in areas such as marriage, divorce and children's custody. On the subject of marriage, for example, polygamy and temporary marriage (*sigheh*) became legal, the minimum marriage age was reduced to nine for girls and fifteen for boys, and fathers were given the right to marry their daughters off at young ages (Burki 2014).

In Pakistan, under the military regime of Zia al-Huq, prior secular laws were abolished and efforts were made to restore and institutionalise the Islamic laws (Tucker 2008). Tucker speaks of two similarities between the Islamisation of legal systems in Iran and Pakistan. First is highlighting the showier areas of penal and personal status law such as unlawful sexual intercourse and women's dress codes meticulously while other crimes have been rather neglected. The second is the both states' overemphasis on sexual aspects of legal systems (that have the highest visibility and the minimum threat of serious opposition) in order to legitimise its power. This Islamisation of legal systems has not however always been a state's policy and sometimes local religious authorities govern sharia laws and traditions in the areas under their control. In Tunisia, where women were granted Western legal codes for years (Bryan 2012), new religious groups such as the Islamist Salafis, emerged in public since 2012 as a counter reaction to Westernisation values to implement their own interpretation of Sharia in the streets (Tadros 2013).

A secularisation of Islamised legal systems has taken place as a reaction to the Islamisation of them. Arzoo Osanloo (2006) argues that the legal system in Iran, similar to its political arenas reflects the dynamics of Islamisation and secularisation. The Iranian legal system in Osanloo's account consists of "Khomeini's principle of Islamic leadership, *Velayat-e Faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurist)" blended with the "French *r'épublique*, reflected a new kind of governance" (Osanloo 2006, p.203). This has provided the ground for the emergence of a 'language of rights' in the legal system in Iran in the recent years. The retention of civil codes in the judicial system of the Islamic Republic, Osanloo admits, is "a wilful political step toward modernisation, on the one hand, and legitimization, on the other hand" (2006, p.203).

Yadav (2010) examines the secularisation process in post-unification Yemen after the Islamisation of the country took place by the Islah Islamic party. Although at first, Yadav writes, the Islamists pursued a series of institutional changes that limited women's access to formal offices

of power, elevated their role within feminised fields and increased their level of segregation from men, there has been a clear shift in their approaches in the recent years. In terms of gender roles, the party has taken a new set of approaches towards women's work, activism, and even leadership. For instance, not only women's contribution to organisation, training, and advocacy work is encouraged by the male Islamist leaders, but they also raised the possibility of women having a role in leadership of the party.

### **Veiling: The Shifting Private-Public Border on Women's Bodies**

Veiling, a "central Islamic mandate", is perhaps the first visible phenomenon by which Muslims are recognisable by non-Muslims and is often introduced as a "prominent marker for Muslim identity" (Mir-Hosseini 2011, p.190). Unlike the other Islamic practices such as prayer and fasting, which are regarded to be more private, veiling is visual. The literature on hijab is arguably thicker and denser than that for any other areas within the writings on Muslim women. Hijab, Mir-Hosseini (2001, p. 205) writes, became a "problem" and "a legal issue to address" only since the late nineteenth century "when the encounter with modernity and women's increasing presence in public space made classical fiqh rulings untenable". Since then, Mir-Hosseini (2011) argues, the discourse on hijab which for many centuries was a tension between "covering and confinement" was dominated by the literature that combined the notion of hijab with new elements such as protection, protest, identity and choice.

Lazreg (2013) suggests a similar but rather more detailed account for categorisation of the narratives of hijab. According to Lazreg, discourses on the veil, have gradually changed in the recent decades from their old phase, when veiling was seen as a means to emphasise the male's superiority over women, to a new phase with three distinctive approaches: the first approach in the literature portrays the veil as a tool by which working-class women could attend the public places freely. A second approach treats the veil as a means for "signalling the failure of 'modernising' policies undertaken by Middle Eastern states" (Lazreg 2013, p. 78). This perspective introduces women's use of veil as an "exercise in female agency either in the form of resistance or empowerment" and a "search for a greater good, such as freedom" (Lazreg 2013, p. 78). The third approach in the literature depicts hijab as a symbol of cultural diversity, a costume or "a religious obligation for a woman" (Lazreg 2013, p. 78).



While accepting the above views, in the current section the studies of and narratives on hijab will be classified into three categories, depending on whether it is considered as an external factor used by patriarchal societies; as a politicised tool which is used to control women's bodies in the struggles and entanglements between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation forces; or, finally, as a means by which women form and deploy their subjectivities.

Authors of the first category speak of veiling and its relationship to women's bodies in a critical way. They criticise hijab for being at the service of patriarchy or at most a means to create more fluidity in patriarchal structures so that women could enter the public sphere while preserving their chastity. Zakaria (1988), for instance, criticises veiling for creating a duality between the spirit and body of women. From an Islamist perspective, a veiled body which, is supposedly protected from other men's desires, will be 'rewarded' by attaining a higher level of spirituality and by entering heaven (Zakaria 1988). Such view that sees the way to heaven passing through women's clothing, Zakaria writes, places a great emphasis on female body.

In the same vein, Gould (2014) argues that since forced veiling homogenises the female body and erases differences among women, veiled women are rendered into what is so-called an Islamic fashion in order to seek distinction. In other words, women exercise their distinction through Islamic fashionable outfits which for Gould is another manifestation of commodification of women's bodies. In making this comment, Gould places the capitalist commodification (where women's nude pictures are advertised in magazines) and what she refers to as a compulsory veiling (where elegant women wrapped in fashionable scarves become representatives of Muslim identity) at the same level. This using of fashionable hijab according to Gould, could create a sort of social hierarchy in a way that wearing elegant head scarves could represent a woman of upper class and vice versa.

In the second approach hijab appears as a politicised notion. Principally, these narratives speak of de-veiling and re-veiling as the boundaries between Islamism and modernity or a battle ground for their endless war. Göle (1997), for instance, portrays veiling as a politicised Islamic practice which has historically forced women to choose between being modern or backward. Ramirez (2014) similarly argues that the old slogan of 'liberation through de-veiling' is one of those mottos that the Western world has continuously used to control the bodies of a segment of population i.e. women through which it could control entire Muslim populations. Abu-Lughod

(2002) has elaborated this issue in her book ‘Do Muslim women need saving?’ in an apt way. She holds the view that the ‘liberation of Afghani women’ from the Taliban was employed by the U.S. government as a basis for the interventions that took place in Afghanistan. Central to Abu-Lughod’s argument is a critique to those Western discourses that “construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving” (2002, p.788) and argue over saving Muslim women (particularly Afghan women) from the ‘prison’ that hijab has created for them.

Another important debate within the narratives on politicised hijab concerns the role of hijab in forming Muslim women’s identity. Scholars of this camp argue that Muslim women wear the hijab to display their “*Muslimness*” (Ali 2005, p.516), to create a desired Muslim female identity (Ilkcaracan 2002), or to highlight women’s role in “preserving this heritage” i.e. the Muslim cultural identities (Hijab 1996, p.43). Hijab according to such view emerges as a device by which Muslims negotiate spaces for themselves within the dominant Western culture (Ruby 2005). Hammami (1990) speaks of the process of *hijabisation* in the Palestinian city of Gaza by the Muslim fundamentalist group of al- Mujama' al-Islami (now Hamas) after the anti- Israeli intifada movement. For Hammami, this approach i.e. restoration of hijab in Gaza, which mainly addressed educated, urban, and middle class women, was an effort by the Islamists toward creating new meanings for piety rather than an authentic Islamic tradition.

The view on veiling as a political means arose in the Muslim world in the 1970s when Islamists started questioning the modernisation experiences of the public arenas (Göle 1997). Göle argues that in this setting, veiling functions as a means for Islamists to claim the public sphere from the secular forces by adding more visibility to Muslim women. According to Cinar, when veiled women walk in the public places that formerly belonged to secularism, “this seemingly trivial piece of clothing imposes an Islamic frame on the public-private distinction and unsettles the established secular norms that constitute publicness” (2008, p.903). She further demonstrates that:

It is exactly through the manipulation of the boundaries of the private as they are marked upon the body—particularly the female body—that the headscarf becomes a subversive force when it emerges in the secular public sphere, asserting its own unconventional and non-secular (Islamic) norms of privacy (2008, p. 903).

In connection with the politicisation of the concept of hijab, Leila Ahmed (2011) has investigated the historical context of re-veiling processes in Egypt; – home of the Muslim Brotherhood – from the late 1960s when “hardly anyone in such cities as Cairo or Alexandria wore hijab” to the 1990s when “Egypt become a society in which the overwhelming majority of women were veiled” (2011, pages 4 and 11). Ahmed lists the re-veiling phases as follows: 1920s-1960s when the unveiling as a major part of modernisation developments set the stage for the Islamic resurgence. During this period (until the end of the Nasser era in Egypt in the late 1960s), the hijab had become rare and Egyptian women increasingly appeared in the streets with ever lighter veils, and soon with no veils at all. 1970s was the decade in which the veil began to reappear due to the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leading intellectual Sayyid Qutb – first among small groups of female university students, and then in society at large. 1980s was the time that re-veiling converted from a new trend to a new way of life, and 1990s, when the Islamists took control of a number of ministries and un-veiled women became a target of hostility.

The third approach that has been identified in this section in studies and narratives on hijab, is one which is more in line with the approach used in this thesis. For the authors who follow this approach, hijab is not simply depicted as a religious practice or a politicised means used by either Islamists or Western colonisers. These narratives and studies, instead, try to link the hijab to women’s subjectivities. The scholars of this approach see veiling not as an external factor (a symbol of Muslim identity, women’s chastity or Islamic resistance) that *objectifies* women but as a cause for changing women’s desires and conduct. Such a perspective on hijab can particularly be seen in the workings of the Iranian scholars who wrote in favour of the hijab during the Revolution in 1979. These narratives not only gave a new meaning to the hijab (a means for emancipation) which was in contrast with its classical definition (a means for preserving chastity or resisting the Western invasions), but it also gave new meanings to women’s presence and their activism in the public sphere in Iran and even all over the Muslim world.

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari is one of the scholars of this camp whose ideas were greatly influential in imposing the hijab after the Islamic Revolution in Iran (Mir-Hosseini 2001). Although Motahhari sees hijab as a protection and such a perspective is compatible to the classic Islamic fiqh, his views on women are rather in contrast to the traditional ulama who believed in women’s confinement to the private sphere. Thus, for Motahhari, whose own wife was a school teacher, veiling empowers women through facilitating their presence in the public sphere:

[Motahhari's] notion of hijab as protection invests women with agency and power, which the clerical discourse had denied them. This power is however, double-edged, because it not only places the burden of society's moral and sexual purity on women by requiring them to observe the *hijab*, but also makes any other mode of clothing a provocation (Mir-Hosseini 2011, p.199).

Ali Shariati, the other major Islamic ideologue of pre-revolutionary Iran, also expressed a rather different and still innovative view about hijab. Shariati's role, Mir-Hosseini (2011) points out, was specifically important in changing the meaning of hijab from a traditional Islamic practice to a symbol of women's will in making a change. He defined hijab as a conscious choice that women take to reclaim their lost identity from the Western imperialists and such a view mobilised many women to the streets to overthrow the Shah's tyranny along with men (Mir-Hosseini 2011). Hijab for Shariati and many other thinkers like him was liberating and empowering and not a "symbol of the return to premodern Islamic traditions", and consequently a veiled revolutionary woman was "an active, demanding and even militant woman who is no longer confined to her home" (Göle 1997, p.84).

This section has described what is generally understood to be the gist of the different narratives on hijab. Three approaches in the workings on hijab were examined in this section: the first approach has a critical view on hijab and sees veiling as a manifestation of patriarchy. The second approach focuses on the position of hijab in relation to the conflicts of Islamisation and modernisation forces. Veiling according to this view is a politicised means through which "Islamisation has gained visibility" and also a symbol of resistance in "stands on the confrontation between Islamic movements and the modernist elites" (Göle 1997, p.85). The third approach focuses on the relationship between veiling and women's agency, particularly during and after the 1979 Revolution. This view presents a new image of a veiled woman as a carrier of a renewed or modern Islam.

### **Chapter 3: Women's responses to the forces of capitalist Globalisation and Islamisation**

A key aspect in analysing Muslim women's movements lies in paying attention to the specifics of these movements in each Muslim country, as well as in terms of culture and class. Nadjie Al-Ali (2002) reminds us that, in examining women's subjectivities, women's movements and gender relations, it is critical to avoid hasty generalisations, since each country in the Middle East is different from the rest in terms of its historical and political backgrounds (geography, economic conditions, ethnic groups, social classes, religious affiliations, nationalities, and linguistic communities), and women's activism in different Middle Eastern societies is not an exception to this considerable diversity. And yet it is equally clear that there are also significant common aspects in the situation of women in Muslim countries from the area normally referred to as the Middle East; where, according to Sadiqi and Ennaji (2011, p.1), women experience "a space-based patriarchy, a culturally strong sense of religion, a smooth co-existence of tradition and modernity, a transitional stage in development". Except in what concerns the crucial issue of the 'co-existence of tradition and modernity', which, as can be seen in this thesis, far from 'smooth', is on the contrary riddled with tensions and conflict, Sadiqi and Ennaji's point is a good reminder of the importance of avoiding both over-generalisation and what can be called over-particularisation.

In the preceding chapters the major dynamics and processes that underpin the emergence of Islamist movements throughout the Middle East have been described and how women's emancipation has been bound to these processes has been examined. In so doing the struggles between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation have mainly been considered as *external* forces which influence and even shape different areas of women's lives in the Middle Eastern societies. A critical aspect of such dynamics lies in the fact that women themselves have obviously, if to different extents, adopted these dynamics internally. It is these dynamics affecting women's inner beings, indeed their subjectivities that we seek to address now. Hence the two main aims of this chapter: first, I seek to challenge what Charrad (2011, p.418) has rightly described as "the stereotype of the silent, passive, subordinate, victimised, and powerless" Muslim woman. In conjunction with this, second, I will try to show how the dynamics of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation has provided the ground for shaping and forming women's subjectivities in the Middle East and more specifically Iran.

The first section of this chapter will specifically deal with the formation of women's movements in the Middle East in relation to capitalist modernity. I will thus discuss the impact that state-backed feminism (as a part of modernisation projects), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international declarations for women's rights have had on generating a feminist consciousness in Middle Eastern women. The second section will examine women's activism within Islamist groups and in opposition to Western feminism. Finally, I will investigate the emergence of Islamic feminism as a 'middle ground' way and as a strategy that some women's rights activists have used to reconcile religion and feminism.

### **Capitalist modernisation and women's movements**

Although factors affecting the rise of movements seeking women's rights in the Middle East are more diverse than is often admitted, including in cross-national terms, many authors link the emergence of women's movements to developments that took place in these countries as a result of modernisation processes, which include policies and initiatives such as state-funded feminism, international conventions (such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women or CEDAW) and the growth of NGOs. In this section, while investigating the impact of such factors in the formation of feminist movements in the Middle East, I will examine the origin of feminist thought in the Middle East and the critiques against it.

Hatem (2013) and Mir-Hosseini (2006) describe state feminism as a series of efforts that some authoritarian nationalist states in the Middle East – mainly Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Algeria, Libya, Jordan, Iran and Turkey – undertook in order to nationalise gender agendas in post-colonial times, a purpose for which they adopted (and imposed) Western liberal gender ideas as role models on Middle Eastern countries. Scholars such as Hatem criticise these feminist initiatives supported by the state for focusing only on the showier aspects of women's rights, particularly those directly related to women's economic participation, and failing to challenge the structure of patriarchy in any way: "these states presented themselves to their citizens and the world as socially progressive states that embraced gender equality, even though their political authoritarianism could not be doubted" (2013, p.97).

There are also debates among scholars on whether or not state reforms in gender relations generated awareness in women concerning their rights and an active attitude to pursue and defend

them. In this respect it is very problematic to refer to state feminism, which perhaps should be named *statist* feminism, as a women's rights movement, given that the position of women underlying state feminism policies was one of passivity and that they were *de facto* considered as receivers of a grant rather than initiators and leaders of a permanent transformation. Hatem (2013) argues that by focusing on the demands of women from upper and middle classes, state feminism failed to address women's issues stemming from the lower strata of society. The main focus of these efforts, Hatem writes, was on increasing literacy and employment among women from the upper and middle classes so as to improve these states' national and international reputations. Morocco is among the countries where girls' education became popular among the middle and upper classes under the state's modernisation projects (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006), but little was changed in terms of the status of women from working-class families.

Other scholars criticise state feminism for discouraging the active segment of middle-class women from forming *independent* movements to seek their rights. Mir-Hosseini (2006) argues that in Iran it was the state who controlled the nascent women's activism and the scope of women's rights activities during the Pahlavi period. Women's emerging activism in Iran, Mir-Hosseini points out, was also controlled through the closure of independent feminist organisations. In many Arab states, feminists from the upper strata supported state feminism in exchange for state funding and governmental positions, which resulted in a national takeover of gender agendas by these states (Hatem 2013). In Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, for instance, the state granted to women various forms of state welfare such as education, jobs, labour rights and maternity leave, while at the same time it shut down independent women's organisations (Abu-Lughod 2010).

Despite all the above critics, there are, however, authors who hold the view that state feminism was a help in the creation of a feminist consciousness among women. These authors (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006, Mhadhbi 2012) argue that despite its authoritarian nature, state feminism opened a door for women from middle and upper class backgrounds who later formed the first sparks of the feminist movements. Mhadhbi (2012) has examined state feminism in Tunisia under the Habib Bourguiba regime. She believes that the image of feminist women in Tunisia is stronger than elsewhere in the Arab-Muslim world and the reason for this is the existence of particular gender-friendly legislations, principally The Code of Personal Status (CPS), which was passed by Bourguiba.

Mojab (2001) suggests that awareness about women's rights in Islamic societies originates from the first contacts with Western feminism. For Mojab, Muslim women's writings and their scattered protests against male domination in pre-modern time were more of a 'feminine' insight rather than a movement for women's rights. She thus holds the view that feminist consciousness first emerged in Muslim societies in modern times. As a result of this feminist awareness, Mojab writes, the advocacy of women's emancipation was led and shaped by scholars whose thinking later crystallised in women's claims for "a redistribution of power both in private and public spheres" (2001, p.128). Whereas feminist theory in the West was largely a product of the enlightenment and the rise of capitalism, in the Middle East it was rather an accident of history without being backed by any theorising or organised debates (Mojab 2001).

Badran (2005) similarly argues that the rise of feminism in the Middle East took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to confrontations with Western imperialism and colonialism. Despite its Western origin, Badran writes, feminism in the Middle East was formed by middle and upper-class women in various locations throughout the Middle East. These women, according to Badran, began to generate a feminist discourse that was "a critique of being held back from accessing the benefits of modernity as freely as their male counterparts because they were female and a legitimization of their moves forward" (2005, p.7). Whereas for Mojab feminist theory in the Middle East was a new and relatively unpredictable discourse which accidentally entered Muslim societies, Badran puts more weight on women's roles in the formation of a 'Middle Eastern' type of feminist thought which despite its Western origin has been localised in the cultural context of the region:

Middle Eastern feminism/s in the Middle East [...] originate in the Middle East. Like feminisms everywhere, they are born on and grow in home soil. They are not borrowed, derivative or "secondhand." Yet, feminism/s in the Middle East, as in other places, may and do intersect with, amplify, and push in new directions, elements of feminisms found elsewhere (2005, p.13).

In the same vein, Sadiqi and Ennaji (2006) speak of Morocco as a country where a genuine feminist movement originated from the state's efforts in expanding women's rights in the 1940s. As opponents of state feminism, these scholars argue that the Moroccan feminist movement formed in 1946 consisted of middle- and upper-class women who first gained education and job opportunities becoming the first female pharmacists, jurists, medical doctors and university



professors. Sadiqi and Ennaji hold the view that the increasing presence of women in the public sphere was a result of the liberal reforms of key political ‘male’ actors, such as individual thinkers, the monarch, and political parties.

International conventions and campaigns, world conferences/projects sponsored by the United Nations, World Bank and IMF and NGO-initiated efforts are also considered among the factors that influenced feminist movements in the Middle East (Hamid 2006). Tohidi (2002) suggests that the grouping together of global forums such as the UN, the World Bank and the IMF and local/national contexts prompted the growth of feminist consciousness among women. Honarbin-Holliday similarly argues that in Iran women’s non-governmental organisations played an important role in “the recognition of women’s equal and rightful ownership of the public sphere, whether legal, political, or social” (2008, p.127). Sadiqi and Ennaji (2006) argue that in Morocco the feminist movement (supported by various agents such as international organisations, conventions across the world such as the ‘Convention to End Discrimination Against Women’ (CEDAW) and human rights NGOs) was successful in reforming Family Law and bringing about more equality for women.

In a similar way, Moghadam and Sadiqi (2006) emphasise the role of women’s organisations and women’s access to various forms of media in changing the nature of the public sphere in the Middle East and women’s contributions to it. They argue that increasing feminisation of the public sphere in a number of Middle Eastern countries is a result of the emergence of women as political actors, their strategic use of the media as a means of access to the public sphere, their contributions to the democratisation of the public sphere, the formation of a modern civil society, and women’s roles in a legal reform.

There are several scholars who speak against feminism in the Middle East and believe that feminist theory fails to contribute to emancipating Muslim women, because the majority of Middle Eastern women do not fit within the scope of that theory’s goals. Al-Ghanim, for instance, rejects feminism in the Arab world (which here can be taken to mean the entire Middle East) for being confined to a narrow intellectual elite and for being unable to deal with “the views, consciousness and situation of most Arab women” (2013, p.83). She writes:

If the feminist movement is at the vanguard of the process to change the condition of Arab women, how is it that Gulf, rural, Bedouin and most other Arab women have not heard of

it, or its slogans? What do concepts such as women's liberation, raising women's standards and the elimination of discrimination against women mean to the simple or recently urbanized woman, in different parts of the Arab world? (2013, p.83)

Supporting the original Western feminism theory, Al-Ghanim (2013) similarly argues that while feminism in a Western context tries to remove the boundaries of the feminine-masculine system and places women on the right track, Arab feminist thought lowers the status of women by creating an oppressed and persecuted image of Arab women. As a result of such an image of women, narratives emerged that, instead of dealing with the genuine issues of Muslim women, tried to create an exaggerated identity out of women, including in terms of women militancy and capacity for emancipatory political action, so that, as Al-Ghanim writes, "women were made to appear as though the saviours of humanity from injustice, hatred and war, and the most active and rebellious element in society" (2013, p.84).

Muhanna-Matar (2014) is another author who criticises feminism in the Muslim world through an examination of women's activism in Arab countries after the Arab Spring. She criticises the old elitist liberal and socialist model of feminism in the region – mainly adopted by the educated middle- and upper-class Arab women elite – and argues that during the uprisings women with no knowledge of feminism showed multiple forms of activism and leadership and played a key role in the struggle against authoritarian regimes and their oppressive systems. The massive participation of ordinary women in the protests, Muhanna-Matar admits, not only provided the ground for a "new form of women's, or feminist, consciousness and practice" but also challenged traditional feminists by raising a question: does feminism necessarily require a moral critique of patriarchal religious/traditional practices? (2014, p.6).

By way of summary and conclusion it can be said that feminism in the Middle East is considered by many authors to be a direct result of modernity. While accepted by some as a factor that has had a positive role in increasing women's awareness of their rights, feminist thought and its axioms are often considered as an imported model from the West which tries to solve Arab women's problems "without looking at the contextual framework in which orbit they revolve, or the limits of their interpretive potential outside their local cultural context" (Al-Ghanim 2013, p.88).

## **Women's movements within an Islamic context**

One prevailing category in the writings on women's agency in the Middle East is women's participation in Islamist groups and their efforts to find spaces to increase their representation within these groups. Islamist movements, with their religious and anti-Western ideology, have been seen throughout the region in countries such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen and Pakistan where the dynamics of modernisation and Islamisation is more evident. In this section, I will first examine not only the nature of women's involvement in Islamist movements but also the extent to which feminist discourses have influenced Islamist women's struggle to change their subordinate role within these groups.

Abdellatif and Ottaway (2007) provide us with a number of important insights into Islamist women's activism and their interaction with feminist movements. The definition of women's roles and rights that these women have adopted within an Islamic framework "challenges both dominant interpretations of Islamic views of women and the Western view of a universally valid definition of women's rights" (Abdellatif and Ottaway 2007, p.6). Islamist women, Abdellatif and Ottaway write, are on one hand "extremely unlikely to accommodate themselves meekly to an interpretation of Islam that relegates women to a subordinate social and political condition" (2007, p.7). They, on the other hand, reject feminist ideas such as gender equality so that it is difficult to know for sure if their claims on rights go beyond challenging their roles within the movements (Abdellatif and Ottaway 2007).

Jad (2011) has observed the Islamist women of Hamas in Palestine and their controversial relationship with secular feminist ideas. She explains how these Islamic groups, while attempting in a systematic way to delegitimise Western feminist discourse and link women's NGOs to Western culture, still insist on using the language of women's rights which originally comes from feminist discourses. Through interviews with female leaders of Hamas, Jad noticed that these women all seek "the public good", "sustainable development" and "the individual self" in their work as well as in political activism and their daily practice, and that such aims are all borrowed and co-opted by the Islamists from secular contexts (2011, p.193). According to Jad (2010), in the approaches that these women take there is a tendency to inadvertently or subconsciously rely on ideas that they vehemently reject. Jad's view is that the use of women's rights discourse by Islamist activists cannot simply be driven by the Quran or other related religious texts, but is rather

influenced by the discourse of nationalist and feminist secularist groups that Islamists have always opposed.

Alatiyat and Barari conducted a similar study on the dynamics and interaction of three mainstream Islamic movements in Jordan (the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front, and the Islamic Centrist Party) with feminist movements, particularly since “the emergence of a more daring, feminist oriented and rights-based discourse on women’s issues” in these groups (2010, p.361). Alatiyat and Barari found that as a result of these interactions and within the Islamist groups, women’s representation has now improved to the extent that the “views on women’s representation in decision-making bodies” within these Islamic movements “have shifted from strong objection to women’s political leadership in 1989 to nominating female election candidates in 2003” (2010, p.360). Female Islamists, according to Alatiyat and Barari, “have almost taken over one of Jordan’s major women’s organizations, namely the General Federation of Jordanian Women” (2010, p.370). These women, Alatiyat and Barari write, have “more far-reaching capabilities than many of the non-Islamist women’s organizations, especially at the grassroots levels” (2010, p.370).

Jamal’s two year observation of Jamaat-e-Islami women in Pakistan reveals an important facet of these Islamist women: while being religious and pious, Islamist women try to present themselves as “modern subjects” that claim their equal rights (2009, p.9). These women, Jamal states, not only are not anti-modern but in fact are “the catalysts of modernisation” by enhancing people’s participation “in electoral and other forms of political activity related to the modern nation-state” (2009, p.9). The modernity that Jamaat-e-Islami women seek is, however, rather different from the Western version. Jamal argues that “Jamaat-e-Islami women describe themselves as modern but take care to distance their modernity from the West; they fight for the rights of women but distinguish their activism from feminism” (2009, p.12). They, for instance, reject the international organisations such as the United Nations, Western governments and international and NGOs that support feminists (Jamal 2009).

Debuysere’s study (2015) has similarly examined the dynamics of Islamisation and Western modernity and women as the carriers of both. She has investigated Islamist women’s organised activism in Tunisia, a recent phenomenon which arose in post-uprising times as a reaction to the state’s strict control over religious affairs. According to Debuysere, the Islamist

women's associations share commonalities and at the same time key differences to their secular feminist counterparts. They, for instance, "speak in an alternative language about their rights; a language characterized by a blend of piety and choice, religiosity and rights" (Debuysere 2015, p.4). Islamist women, are, on the one hand, engaged in negotiations about the fundamental improvement of women's status in Tunisia and are involved in issues such as the implementation of the Personal Status Code, increasing political participation of women, and improving socio-economic conditions for women in a similar way to secular feminists. On the other hand, they reject the gender discourse that secular feminists try to promote as well as the acceptance of international agreements on women's rights.

Aksoy (2015) has studied women's activism within the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) in Turkey. Aksoy argues that although RP benefited from women's participation in RP's election campaigns nationwide, no political share was given to women. As a result, a group of Islamist women activists began to challenge and criticise men's dominance in the Islamist movement which later led to the formation of Islamist women's civil society organisations (CSOs) with the aim of promoting women's demands for political participation. These Islamist women's organisation which, according to Aksoy, were formed by veiled middle- and upper-middle class women, aim to achieve a form of 'pious self-development' in women for which they encourage women to pursue their education and participate in social and economic life with the veil.

Yadav (2010) has studied changes in women's agency through interviewing female members of Islah, Yemen's largest Islamic party during the 1990s and 2000s. She argues that throughout the 1990s, the Islamists pursued a series of policies that limited women's access to "formal offices of power" and "elevated their role within "feminized" fields and disciplines" (2010, p.9). Despite these initial limitations and due to the need for women's work, women were further encouraged to gain organisational training and accept cultural positions within the group which later extended to advocacy work, positions regarding direction, and guidance. For Yadav, Islahi women, despite being segregated from men, have found their way into the public sphere and have eventually changed the debates on women's political participation in Yemen and have initiated undermining the exclusion of women's activism. Yadav writes that:

Spatial segregation has not entailed seclusion from the public, but has allowed Islahi women to develop a powerful set of leadership skills which they are now leveraging for

increased influence within the party. [Islahi women] have secured a role in key decision-making bodies through participation in a competitive electoral process (2010, pp.9 and 24).

Taken together the current section provides us with two important observations on women's activism in Islamist contexts. First of all, "Islamist women are agentive, dynamic actors who respond to changing discursive and institutional circumstances, just as they help to shape them" (Yadav 2010, p.24). They, however, "may exercise their agency in ways that may appear perplexing to even the most open-minded of Westerners" (Hamid 2006, p.84):

Muslim women do have a clearly discernible desire to assert themselves as women, yet at the same time they feel that they must stay true to certain rigid gender constructions in order to hold on to a cultural and religious identity they see as being under attack (2006, p.86).

This reveals a need in feminist scholarship, particularly regarding the Muslim world, to take into account women's subjectivities and their implications in order to understand better both the varieties of women's activism in the Muslim world (Yadav 2010) and how women's struggles also involve opposition and conflict between women aligned to different ideological, religious and political positions. As Abdellatif and Ottaway note:

it does not take much work for a researcher to discover that there are many powerful personalities and determined individuals behind the head scarves and the seemingly self-effacing behavior of women in Islamist movements (2007, p.2).

Another important aspect of Islamist women's activism is their efforts to display a pious modern image of themselves. Despite their rejection of feminist theory as the basis for the gender policies of the groups they belong to, particularly their apparently firm opposition to the most distinctive aspect of feminism, namely, the equality between women and men, they have selected a number of aspects of feminist theory such as women's empowerment and agency which cannot be simply dismissed.

### **Islamic feminism: an effort to reconcile Islamism and modernity**

One important turning point in women's rights movements in the Middle East was the arrival of Islam into a feminist discourse which was previously occupied mainly by secular feminism. The term Islamic feminism is widely used by many scholars within the Muslim world (e.g. Fatima Mernissi, Aziza Al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan and Leila Ahmed) (Moghadam 2002), but it is particularly

widespread among scholars from parts of the Middle East where Islamism, or political Islam, has had a long presence, for example, in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood re-emerged in the early 1970s, and in Iran a decade after the Islamic Revolution (Badran 2005). Because of its prevalence among Iranian scholars, a more in-depth analysis of the debates around Islamic feminism will be discussed in the sections devoted to feminist movements in Iran.

The emergence of Islamic feminism is believed to have taken place under the influence of two factors. The first factor according to Hamid (2006) was the appearance of a postmodern feminist wave that – unlike the previous waves that insisted on a Western form of feminism – emphasised heterogeneity and cultural differences. The other major reason according to Eyadat (2013) and Mir-Hosseini (2006) was the rise of fundamentalist Islam and, in this context, the growing women’s effort to develop a less conservative reading of Islam. Mir-Hosseini describes Islamic feminism as women’s criticism of Islamists who would “translate into policy the patriarchal gender notions inherent in traditional Islamic law” (2006 p.639).

The arrival of Islamic feminist discourse gave rise to debates on whether or not Islam and feminism can come together. Charrad argues that before the arrival of Islamic feminism the feminist movements’ narratives were showing “a high level of consensus and solidarity” whereas the new trend broke that consensual view and brought about serious disputes between the rapidly emerging different feminisms (2011, p.428). The scholars who try to bring the language of international rights and democracy into Islamic legal vision emphasise the feminist side of Islamic feminism (Mir-Hosseini 2006, Honarbin-Holliday 2008 and Shaditalab 2006).

Moghadam (2002), for example, refers to Islamic feminism as an ‘Islamic version’ of Western feminism which attempts to explore the possibilities for women’s emancipation within. Najmabadi (2005) and Bayat (2007) similarly argue that Islamist feminists are originally feminists who rely on Islamic discourse to push gender equality within the bounds of Islamic governments, a tendency which is evident in their translation and publication of the writings of Western feminists. There are also scholars who likewise seek a more gender-friendly interpretation of Islam while refusing to be referred to or labelled as Islamic feminists. Seedat (2013) describes Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas as scholars who, while considering their works ‘pro-feminism’, object to being labelled as feminists:

Wadud might find it necessary to distance herself from feminist discourse as a way of maintaining the primacy of a Muslim identity, Muslim societies having borne the heavy burdens of colonial and empire-based feminism (2013, p.416).

Islamic feminism has been criticised or strongly rejected in various ways. Grami (2012) challenges Islamic feminists on account of the principle of ‘selectivity’ they use in relating to Islam and modernity, a selectivity whereby they take on or reject what suits their purposes, without any consistent criteria. Grami describes Islamic feminism as the feminism which is covered with an “Islamic garb” by scholars who “fear of being accused of loyalty to the West” (2012, p.110). Grami (2012) also criticises Islamic feminism for putting too much emphasis on the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic texts and avoiding addressing the political, economic and historical factors that influence women’s status. Grami is in fact against the narratives that assume that there is an exclusive path to Muslim women’s emancipation and reject any diversion from such a path. Seedat (2013) for her part compares the aforementioned selective ‘pick and choose’ approach to Islamic feminism with the homogenising approach of the second wave of feminism and concludes that Islamic feminists, in a similar way to the second wave feminists, tend to erase the differences between Muslim and other women’s struggle for equality.

There are also a number of scholars who vehemently reject any convergence of Islam and feminism i.e. Islamic feminism. Among them are secular feminists such as Haideh Moghissi, Reza Afshari and Shahrzad Mojab who are against any combination of Islam and feminism, as they consider that Islam is an intrinsically hierarchical and anti-feminist religion (Seedat 2013). Since a majority of these authors are Iranian, we will analyse their debates in the next chapter. There are other authors like Zeenath Kausar and Nuraan Davids who reject Islamic feminism because of what they believe to be the ‘secular’ and ‘materialistic’ nature of feminist movements, which they argue can never be affiliated with Islam. These two rejections thus come from two very different positions: one which gives priority to secular feminism (that is the case of Haideh Moghissi, Reza Afshari and Shahrzad Mojab) and the other which prioritises Islam (Kausar and Davids). What Kausar advocates instead of Islamic feminism is in fact an “accountability toward God” and the “Islamisation of knowledge” that she believes empower women (Seedat 2013, p.412), which is clearly a religious position at odds with any secular feminism.

In the same vein, Davids (2014) believes that a consequence of accepting Islamic feminism is the exclusion and “the further marginalisation of Muslim women from their own



understandings of Islam, as well as their own identity” (2014, p.13). One concern that Davids, Kausar and authors with a similar view have in common is their agreement upon the oppressive interpretation of the Quran. Rejecting Islamic Feminism as a tendency which is not internal to Islamic education, Davids’ suggestion for Muslim women is to have their “own autonomous interrogation of Islamic education”, “to independently pursue their own understanding of what Islam says about Muslim women” and “to assume responsibility for their own education (2014, p.10). One problem with Davids’ proposal is that her solution appears to be over-ambitious since she fails to fully specify how women could pursue their own Islamic education in the current situation. The other drawback of Davids’ suggestion is that despite the rejection of feminist discourses, she constantly refers to terms such as equality or social and gender justice in her writings which are themselves borrowed from feminist discourse – which is another manifestation of the contradictions that abound in this variety of what we might call feminist Islamism.

Islamic feminism was investigated in the current section as a rather new trend in feminism, an approach which is suggested by some scholars as a way to reconcile religious with feminist discourses. While some authors see Islamist feminists as feminists who are also religious, for some Islamic feminism is more a re-interpretation of gender disputes in terms of Sharia than a type of feminism. The main critiques of Islamic feminism come from secular feminists who see Islam as too rigid to reform, and from those authors who see the feminist side of Islamic feminism as Western and foreign to the Muslim world.

## **Chapter 4: Women's Movements in Iran and Their Singularity**

### **Revolution in 1979 and the formation of the Muslim female revolutionary identity**

Women's status in the Middle East and the relationship of their emancipatory struggles with feminist movements and Islamist groups were discussed in Chapter Three. Although women's activism exists in most Middle Eastern countries; the women's movement in Iran is unique in the Middle East in its aims, identity and the extent of activities. There are many factors that may have contributed to this distinction, but it is widely believed that it was the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and particularly the decisive revolutionary role played by Iranian women in bringing it about, which created a turning point in the development of women's activism, emancipatory struggles and more generally political participation in Iran. The Islamic Revolution and subsequent events such as the Iran-Iraq War, the Reformist Movement and the Green Revolution not only created new meanings and implications for women's movements in Iran, but also inspired women's movements in other Muslim societies in a significant way. A combination of these factors provided an environment for women with different political and religious orientations to interact with the state and challenge their subordinate status.

Some scholars argue that there were no notable women's movements in the pre-revolutionary era. One mainstream discussion in such literature is that women's activism before the Revolution was either state-managed or directly influenced by the ideological currents of the time, and women suffered the lack of a genuine movement with no affiliation to the centres of power, political parties or ideologies. Rostami-Povey (2012) argues that the driving force behind any changes in women's status during the Pahlavi period was the state's concern for its image as a Westernised state rather than gender equality itself. Hoodfar (1999) similarly argues that during the three decades of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s it was the state that had taken over women's affairs and as a result, any activities to improve the status of women had to be taken place under its strict surveillance. The formation of the High Council of Iranian Women's Organisations under the supervision of the Shah's sister, Princess Ashraf, Hoodfar writes, was, for instance, among the state's attempts to bring all women's organisations under its umbrella.

Mahdi (2004) refers to women's movement in pre-revolutionary Iran as a 'failure'. The reason for this failure, Mahdi argues, was, firstly, the state's interventions in women's activism and its "limited and managed emancipation from above" which led to a "delayed active and meaningful participation of women in society and politics" (Mahdi 2003, p.4). Secondly, state-funded women's organisations had apolitical approaches which were mainly focused on women's health and education and thus women's political participation was not encouraged and no genuine women's movements were formed (Mahdi 2004).

In addition to the above points, there are other explanations for the failure of women's movements before the Revolution. Mahdi lists "a well-defined set of objectives", "planned regular activities" and "adequate organizational structures and networks" as three factors which were missing from women's activism before the Revolution (2004, p.438). Without defined objectives and structures, women's movements could not be strong enough to address ingrained *patriarchal* structures in a meaningful and efficient manner. The third reason for the failure of women's emancipatory movements in Iran according to Mahdi (2004) was that the organisers, the participants and the beneficiaries of women-related accomplishments were mainly educated women of middle and upper classes and thus a large number of illiterate women in rural areas and lower class women were not included.

For many authors the Islamic Revolution was a major turning point for women's political participation in Iran, and they argue that the Revolution was the driving force behind political awareness and activism among Iranian women, regardless of their social class. Mahdi (2003), Hoodfar (1999), and Najmabadi (2005), for instance, compare the dynamic social role of Iranian women in the post-revolutionary period to women's rather passive status in the pre-revolutionary period in order to highlight the impact of the Islamic Revolution on women's activism. Although Iranian women had previously participated in and even organised uprisings or gatherings in favour of certain political movements under a male leadership (for instance Tobacco Movement of 1889-1891 and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911), none of them, however, were considered as widespread and pervasive as women's participation in the Revolution (Derayeh 2011). There were also women who joined various political parties or the larger movements such as communist, nationalist or socialist parties in the decades prior to the Revolution. Mahdi (2004) and Moghissi

(2004) argue that despite their organised activities these women did not achieve their aims due to the 1953 coup d'état in Iran and the elimination of these parties by the Shah.

Women's participation in the Revolution in Iran was thus unprecedented in at least three respects. The first was the massive participation of women in the Revolution and crucial role they played in it, regardless of their religious orientations. In comparison to the women's activism in the pre-revolutionary period which, was mainly confined to a particular class, the Revolution was diverse in terms of its participants (Moghadam 2002, Mahdi 2004, and Hoodfar 1999). Although a large number of revolutionary women belonged to the working classes, women of other social classes are known to have joined the Revolution calling for the overthrow of the Shah.

The second important aspect of women's participation in the Revolution was the level of participation of religious women in the demonstrations. The participation of religious women was significant because many of these women were raised with the belief that women should be confined to the private sphere. According to Moghadam (2002), since this presence in public arenas was taking place under the name of Islam, women's presence in the streets was therefore acceptable to the male revolutionaries. Halper aptly states:

Iranian women opposing the Shah worked beside unrelated men without risking their self-respect or their social standing; instead, both were heightened. One can see why, for many women, the Revolution itself seemed to promise a new life (2005, p.104).

The third aspect has to do with the fact that, the Revolution in 1979 is believed by many scholars to have been a platform for women to raise their voices and advance their goals. Hoodfar (1999) argues that the Revolution played a significant role in politicising women's movements in Iran and expanding their scope of activities from boosting education and health to campaigning for their various rights. The Revolution therefore fostered a new subjectivity in Iranian women by politicising them, including in the form of enhancing their presence in public places. This new subjectivity, as will be discussed later, became more distinguished during the three decades after the Revolution and played a crucial role in women's struggles against the patriarchy.

Although women's participation in the Revolution stemmed from different motivations, many women from religious families joined it as they found it liberating to be a part of what they saw as a religious movement. Women's participation in the uprising was particularly encouraged by Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari and Ali Shariati, two main theologians of the Revolution who

both belonged to what Moghadam (2002) refers to as the school of Islamic modernism. Motahhari, Moghadam writes, whilst rejecting Western culture, appreciated women's political participation and their rights to work and obtain an education. Moghadam finds Motahhari's position towards women rather contradictory when she writes: "Motahhari, whose wife was a school teacher, did call for sex segregation in the workplace" (2002, p.1139). Ali Shariati, in his prominent book *Fatima is Fatima* (1971), blames the Western imperialists for their attempts to steal women's identity and introduces Fatima (daughter of the prophet Muhammad) as a role model for Iranian women to find their lost identity:

Women who have remained in the 'traditional mould' do not face the problem of identity while women who have accepted the 'new imported mould' have adopted a foreign identity. But in the midst of these two types of 'moulded women', there are those who can neither accept their hereditary, traditional forms nor did surrender to this impose new form. What should they do? They want to decide for themselves. They want to develop themselves. They need a model, an ideal example, a heroine. For them, the problem of 'Who am I? And who do I become?' are urgent. Fatima, through her own 'being', answers these questions (1971, book introduction).

What is significant about the above ideas of Shariati (and scholars like him) is that he identifies and formalises the role of Muslim women from an angle which modern feminists had not addressed (Sullivan 1998). He suggests a twofold form of Islam which despite being 'anti-West' in nature is 'modern' and innovative. It is little wonder that many Iranian women, inspired by Shariati's words, took hijab, left their homes and joined men in the Revolution to claim what they thought was their lost identity, but in reality was a contribution to overthrowing the Pahlavi regime<sup>3</sup>. Shariati blames women who are the undisputed acceptors and followers of the imposed rules (either traditional or secular) and encourages them to be decision-takers. While rejecting

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<sup>3</sup>The anti-Shah discourses is not limited to Islamists and can be seen in the works of many Iranian pre-revolutionary intellectuals and Marxist (Talattof 2011). Such discourses, as Talattof (2011) explains could send the women to the streets to claim for what they assumed was their 'stolen' identity. Jalal Al-I-Ahmad is among those scholars whose anti-imperialist ideas, although not religious, became part of the ideology of the 1979 revolution. The term 'Westoxication' was used by Al-I-Ahmad to refer to the loss of Iranian cultural identity through adaptation of Western models (Vahdat 2003). Al-I-Ahmad, in his well-known book *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* writes:

So we really have given women only the right to parade themselves in public. We have drawn women, the preservers of tradition, family, and future generations, into vacuity, into the street. We have forced them into ostentation and frivolity, every day to freshen up and try on a new style and wander around. What of work, duty, social responsibility, and character? (1962, p.71)

women's passivity and subordination, he believes that grasping a new form of Islam, and not the traditional Islam, can liberate women (Shariati 1971). He proposes a form of subjectivity for women which requires women to follow Fatima's lifestyle as a role model. This later became a driving force in the formulation of a Muslim revolutionary subjectivity in Iranian women.

There were, however, other factors in the formation of the new subjectivities in Iranian women throughout the first decade after the Revolution. Establishing an *insider/outsider* division among women by the new state is argued by Gerami and Lehnerer (2001) to be among these factors. *Outsiders*, as Gerami and Lehnerer write, were considered by the state as the secular Westernised women who needed to be constrained and *insiders* were the Islamist women who actively participated in the detoxification of women of Western elements. Recruiting women in the basij organisation (paramilitary forces) in 1984 in order to improve morality in the society is considered an example of such divisions (Burki 2014). This new establishment played a crucial role in the survival of the new state by creating dynamism in society and particularly among women (the potential of whom the government was well aware). It also provided Islamist women with what Gerami and Lehnerer referred to as the "new avenues of building autonomy and identity" (2001, p.558).

Rochelle Terman (2010)'s analysis of the processes of identity-making after the Revolution gives us some insights into these processes. Taking Michel Foucault's analytic of *biopower*, she suggests that the participation of Muslim women in political arenas in the immediate post-revolutionary years gave more legitimacy to the young state:

Through biopower and technologies of sex, the state was charged with the job of insuring the survival of the civic body by ridding the community of the 'internal enemy' – the degenerate, the abnormal – in order to maintain its purity, political energy and biological vigor (2010, p.292).

Terman thus argues that for the new regime a Muslim woman was by no means passive and on the contrary, as supporters of the Islamic regime, women were required to constantly participate in public and political arenas. Women's support could in particular provide a continuous purification of the society of "unsuitable" women who had violated the "internal sexual and cultural borders" (Terman 2010, p.292) and enlist other women's support for the new regime (Halper 2005).

Another main factor in the formation of the female Muslim subjectivity during and after the Revolution was probably the standpoint of the leader of the Revolution vis-a-vis women. A comparison between Khomeini's views – which were a reflection of Motahhari and Shariati's views – and the old-school clergy views makes the issue clearer. The ulama (religious leaders) would traditionally emphasise the idea that women belonged to the private arenas and the processes of modernisation of women inevitably resulted in ulama's strongest objections. For instance, Ayatollah Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri (1843-1909) issued a fatwa (a religious decree) stating that establishing girls' schools was against sharia, and Ayatollah Shushtari organised protests against women's education (Hoodfar 1999). Ayatollah Khomeini's position on women was, however, contrary to ulama's<sup>4</sup> as he encouraged (Islamist) women to remain mobilised in political activities after the downfall of the Shah. As was discussed earlier, this phenomenon, the active political participation of women as devout Muslims, was almost unknown in Iranian context (Halper 2005).

The victory of the Revolution and the establishment of an Islamic regime provided many pro-Khomeini women with state positions. The most iconic Islamist female individuals who later achieved managerial and administrative positions as parliamentarians and civil servants are Azam Taleqani, Faizeh Hashemi, Marziyeh Dabbagh, Fereshteh Hashemi, and Zahra Rahnavard, (Moghadam 1999). Halper (2005) writes that Zahra Mostafavi, Ayatollah Khomein's daughter, became one of the leaders of the Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution (WSIR), the role of which was to introduce the authentic Islamic identity to Iranian women alongside supporting the state. These women portrayed ideals of Islamic Iranian womanhood<sup>5</sup> in post-revolutionary Iran. In fact, they were representatives of a 'civic piety' that the Islamic regime began to introduce to the world as the new female identity of the country (Halper 2005). An identity that was similar to the new title for the country – a combination of Islamic and Republic.

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<sup>4</sup>Women's right to vote was another subject of dispute among the ulama including Ayatollah Khomeini himself who viewed this as the complete corruption of Muslim mores (Hoodfar 1999). Khomeini, however, changed his view on women's enfranchisement after the Revolution.

<sup>5</sup> In the Pahlavi period it was the Iranian aspect of the people's collective identity that was constantly emphasised by the state. It is what Sullivan calls the **Shah's** overemphasis on "pre-Islamic Iran to dramatize current "modernity"" (1998, p.217). In post-revolutionary Iran however, the state placed primacy on Islamic rather than Iranian identity.

Among the above Islamist women, Azam Taleghani<sup>6</sup> is perhaps the most prominent example of the revolutionary Islamic female subject. Taleghani, who was elected to the first parliament, continued to hold a prominent political position for the first few years after the Revolution (Hoodfar 1999). What is notable about Taleghani is the way she used her own and her father's reputations to protest the state's mistreatment of women. Mir-Hosseini (2002) argues that Taleghani demanded an explanation from the state when her candidacy for the 1997 presidential election was rejected. These protests, despite being in areas of women's rights that are compatible with Islamic texts (and not about issues such as hijab), challenged some fundamental aspects of the state's gender policies.

A trend towards moderation in the state's gender policies took place within a few years of the Revolution when critical voices from all segments of the society, including conservative women (to be discussed later), called for a new woman-centred interpretation of Islamic texts (Hoodfar 1999). The efforts that Taleghani and other Islamist women made, Mir-Hosseini suggests, is believed to have facilitated the maturation of the state's gender policies. This maturation process involved moderation of some of the regime's most rigorous gender policies over time. Halper (2005) speaks of a shift in Islamist women's prominence over the years. These Islamist women, despite rejecting a feminist label, adopted a language that advocated specific women's rights based on Quranic teachings (Halper 2005). The demands for equality that these Islamist women made on the governments (Mir-Hosseini 2002 and Moghadam 1999) among many other factors such as the Iran-Iraq War gradually shaped the gender ideology of the Islamic Republic.

One important factor in the moderation of the state's gender policy was the eight-year Iran-Iraq War which, despite its fundamental role, has been understated in the literature. While women had a huge impact on the War, their lives, status and even their struggles for emancipation were influenced by it at a large scale. Halper (2005) holds the view that women's support during the War, which included assisting in battle areas, providing food, transport, and medical support, distributing arms and aiding the wounded, had the effect of immediately increasing women's sense of agency and contribution to political life. Women's participation in the War also created an

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<sup>6</sup> Azam Taleghani is the daughter of late Ayatollah Taleghani, a leader of the Islamic Revolution and one active participant in Islamic revolution who served time in prison during the Pahlavi regime.



environment in society in favour of them, as a result of which the government legislated certain women-friendly laws (Mir-Hosseini 2002). Halper writes that:

the pragmatism on display in this move indicated the extent to which the leadership of the IRI was prepared to bend religious practice when retaining the support of women so required it (2005, p.115).

Elaheh Kolaee (2014) is one of the few authors who has undertaken a fairly comprehensive research on women's roles in the War. A former female parliamentarian of the post-War period herself, Kolaee argues that as a result of their participation in the War, women were more in public places and were more involved in the work force (which itself led to a decline in the fertility rate). It also helped women to voice their demands for more political and social participation which could itself change women's way of life, their attitudes and their expectations of life (Kolaee 2014). Kolaee thus holds the view that the War introduced new roles to women and helped them abandon the traditional beliefs that had defined the social life of women as being confined within the framework of the family.

### **Principal gender discourses in post-revolutionary Iran**

The current chapter has so far discussed the crucial role of the Islamic Revolution in the formation of what may be referred to as a new subjectivity in Iranian women, or rather a new dynamic of subjectivity and subjectivation in women, including revolutionary subjectivities, both Muslim and more secularly oriented. The coming sections will speak of, firstly, the existence of a tension-laden relationship between Iranian women and the state in the post-revolutionary period, particularly in the years after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and, secondly, different approaches to women's rights advocacy including as Islamic feminism, secular feminism and Islamist women's advocacy. It will also be shown that the relationship between Iranian women and the Islamic regime has been dynamic and complex and both sides, the state and women, have forced changes on one another.

The current literature on Iranian women generally deals with women's status in post-revolutionary times on two levels. One is the individual level which is focused on the position and approaches of ordinary women in their personal lives. A common debate concerns an increase in women's and emerging individualism, throughout the decades after the Revolution. Kurzman (2008), for instance, observed a flourishing in women's responsiveness in Iran towards decision-making and gender equality, both in marriage and labour force participation. Osanloo (2006)

documents a similar trend in women's awareness towards their legal rights. In her interviews with ordinary Iranian women <sup>7</sup> in Tehran's family court, Osanloo writes that Iranian women "not only express themselves in rich narratives but also increasingly employ a language and tone of the rights-bearing and entitled citizen" (2006, p.203). Moghadam reflects on these changes thus:

Socio-demographic changes, such as the increase in the age at first marriage; lower fertility rates; growing educational attainment and tertiary enrollments; and rising divorce rates, all signal changes in the nature of social dynamics and women's positions within the family, despite the fact that women are still legally disadvantaged (2004, p.21).

This emerging individualism among Iranian women is largely attributed to the liberalisation of markets and developments in interactions with the (Western) world at the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Authors such as Behdad and Nomani (2012) and Etemad Moghadam (2001) argue that the state's economic liberalisation policy<sup>8</sup> and the failure of the state's project of Islamisation of the economy contributed to a certain relaxation and opening of the country's gender policies. For instance, women's roles in labour markets were appreciated, more women achieved higher education and they generally faced fewer obstacles for their participation in political and social arenas (Etemad Moghadam 2001). The state's flexibility towards its gender policies reached its peak during the presidency of the Reformist Mohammad Khatami alongside with an emergence of an NGO-isation trend and the empowerment of civil society organisations (Rostami-Povey 2012). In fact, and as Mir-Hosseini (2002) argues, it was during Khatami's presidency that the notion of civil society entered the government's common discourse. These factors arguably contributed to bring about an 'extensive cultural turn' in Iran (Abrahamian 2008) and provided the basis for moderation in the state's restrictive gender policies.

The second level has to do with women's approaches towards the state's gender policies. Some authors believe that the shift in women's level of participation in the labour market increased their individualism, particularly in the possessive variant, not only at a personal level but also in their relations to the state. Kian (2014), for instance, argues that the higher rates of education and paid employment empowered women in their private life and gave them enough self-confidence

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<sup>7</sup> Ordinary women are referred to as those outside the circle of state power or fame, without outstanding administrative positions, with no experience in women's rights activities.

<sup>8</sup> In fact the second post-revolutionary decade was marked by the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and a rise in the international price of oil (Behdad and Nomani 2012).

to challenge Islamic laws and their second-class citizenship status. For Zahedi (2007) women's creativity in fashioning trendy yet Islamic clothing is, for instance, a manifestation of their individual resistance against the state's enforced dress code. Moghadam, however, distinguishes between these "informal and spontaneous individual acts of resistance" and women's collective actions and their organised protests to challenge patriarchy (2004, p.4). In the absence of large public mobilisations and independent organisations, Moghadam (2004) writes, women in Iran are in a pre-movement phase. Mahdi (2004) similarly argues that there is no homogeneous women's movement in Iran in the classical definition of the term and therefore the activities associated with women's rights in Iran should be called a 'creeping change' rather than a 'movement'.

It was discussed in the previous section that under the dynamics of modernisation and Islamisation forces the nature of women's movements in the Muslim world has become more complex and that women are themselves the carriers of these tensions. In fact, as explained earlier, after the liberalisation of the economy in the post-War years there was greater diversity among women's rights advocates in terms of their ideological orientations. Perhaps, one of the most important developments in the women's rights advocacy as a result of these liberalisations in Iran was the rise of feminism. The following sections will examine the debates around feminist discourse in Iran and the relationship between the feminists and the Islamists.

### *Islamic Feminism*

The emergence of Islamic feminism, as explained before, created controversies in the literature on Iranian women. Referred to as an "unintended effect" of the Islamic Revolution (Sullivan 1998, p.236) or an "unwanted child" of pervasive Islamisation in Iran (Mir-Hosseini 2011, p.70), Islamic feminism is believed to be an outcome of the resolution between two "bitterly opposed isms" i.e. feminism and political Islam (Mir-Hosseini 2011, p.70). Jamal (2009) and Badran (2005) hold the view that Iranian feminist scholars such as Haleh Afshar and Afsaneh Najmabadi were among the first who talked about Islamic feminism as a 'feminist-friendly' version of Islamic texts.

Moghadam suggests that it was Najmabadi who raised the debates over Islamic feminism for the first time. In her speech at the University of London in 1994, Moghadam writes, Najmabadi described Islamic feminism as "a Reform movement that opens up a dialogue between religious

and secular feminists” (2002, p.1143). Sadeghi (2010) refers to Parvin Paidar<sup>9</sup> as the first Iranian scholar to use the term ‘Islamist feminist’ (which eventually changed to ‘Islamic feminism’). Moghadam rejects this claim by arguing that Paidar’s writings did not “engender the kind of harsh debate that has developed since the mid-1990s” (2002, p.1143). Paidar (2001), herself, argues that the term was first used in the Western literature to demonstrate the diversity of the post-revolutionary women’s movement in Iran. Unlike most of the other scholars, Paidar refers to the discourse as ‘Islamist’ and not ‘Islamic’ feminism.

There are also various debates among Iranian scholars over the definition of Islamic feminism. Paidar (2001) suggests that the term applies to the Islamist female activists who despite revising their original resistance to the concept of feminism, however, have found it difficult to refer to the term publicly because of certain political considerations (Paidar 2001). The most prominent among them are the publisher Shahla Sherkat, women’s journal editor Mahboubeh Abbas-Gholizadeh, local councillor Marzieh Mortazi, and former parliament members Faezeh Hashemi, Azzam Taleghani, and Maryam Behrouzi, along with many expatriate academics who despite their support of the Revolution and even holding state positions sought a moderation in family laws (Moghadam (2004). Moghadam writes:

There is no question that Islamic feminists have been inspired by the writings and collective action of feminists from the West and the third world. Any reading of the women’s press in Iran reveals that Iranian women activists and scholars, including those who define themselves as Muslim or Islamic and eschew the label “feminist,” engage with transnational feminism (2002, p.1164).

Mir-Hosseini (2011) introduces to us another important categorisation for Islamic feminists which does not stand in a fundamental contrast to those of Paidar and Moghadam’s. For Mir-Hosseini, Islamic feminists were a number of Islamist women such as Shahla Sherkat, Azam Taleghani, and Zahra Rahnavard who once had a role in “silencing other women’s voices” after the Revolution but nonetheless became “disillusioned with the Islamic Republic’s official discourse on women” by the early 1990s and “joined the ‘New Religious Thinkers’” (2011, p.70). While a majority of these women had “no problem with being called ‘Islamic feminists’” and found it an appropriate description”, Mir-Hosseini argues, a few of them rejected the feminist side

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<sup>9</sup>Parvin Paidar (1949-2005), the Iranian writer and campaigner, was one of the pioneering scholars who highlighted the importance of combining Islam and feminism (Sadeghi 2010).

of Islamist feminism (2011, p.4). Among them was Mahboube Abbasgholizadeh, who, during an informal interaction with Mir-Hosseini, expressed her belief that the term feminist was irrelevant to Iran and Muslims<sup>10</sup> (Mir-Hosseini 2011).

Many scholars (e.g. Moghadam 2002, Moghadam 2004, Sadeghi 2010, and Mir-Hosseini 2011) have tried to compare Islamist feminism with the other discourses on women's rights in Iran. Sadeghi (2010), for instance, classifies the gender discourses in post-revolutionary Iran into three 'competing' discourses i.e. the fundamentalist discourse, the Islamic feminism (which she refers to as religious revisionism), and the secular feminism. Mir-Hosseini (2006) classifies the opponents of Islamic feminism into broader categories which are the Muslim traditionalists, those who reject any changes in sharia, Islamic fundamentalists, those who seek a return to an earlier version of the sharia, and secular fundamentalists, those who deny the conformity of sharia and feminism and are almost as dogmatic as the other two groups.

Among the other authors, Moghadam's (2002) categorisation provides a useful guide for our analysis here. She suggests a theoretical framework for the comparative analysis of the viewpoints of two groups of expatriate academics on whether or not Islam is compatible with feminism (2002, p.1142). The first of these two opposing camps, Moghadam argues, consists of: the *supporters* of Islamic feminism such as Afsaneh Najmabadi, Nayereh Tohidi, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini who "explore the possibilities that exist within Islam and within the IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran] concerning women's interests" (2002, p.1142). Moghadam proposes a correspondence between these academics and the liberal feminists in the US who both work within the existing political systems. Liberal feminists, Moghadam asserts, seek to improve women's positions within the discursive framework of liberal capitalism, and Islamic feminists similarly question the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic texts within the political system of the Islamic Republic.

The second camp in Moghadam's analysis consists of the *antagonists* of Islamic feminism, namely Haideh Moghissi, Shahrzad Mojab, and Hamed Shahidian, who reject the possibilities for improvements in women's status under the Islamic regime in Iran. Moghadam criticises scholars of this camp for, firstly, holding an essentialist view on women's agency in the Islamic

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<sup>10</sup> After joining the Reformist movement in the mid-2000s, Abbasgholizadeh referred to herself as a 'secular feminist' (Mir-Hosseini 2011).

Republic. She also argues that these scholars, hold a narrow definition of feminism based on radical Anglo-American feminism, reject Islamic feminism as a strand of feminism. What Moghadam suggests is thus the possibility to “classify Islamic feminism as one feminism among many” instead of rejecting it. Najmabadi, Mir- Hosseini, and Mojab have expressed different opinions towards Moghadam’s analysis.

Najmabadi’s (1998) dispute which contains a sharp criticism of secular feminists – mainly Haideh Moghissi<sup>11</sup>– is relatively in line with Moghadam’s analysis of the two opposing camps. Referring to Moghissi’s account: “The Islamic regime has not opened the gates. Women are jumping over the fences”, Najmabadi criticises Moghissi for proposing a ‘solid’ image of women’s position in Iran. Najmabadi argues that Moghissi’s view is not only against the regime but is also against Islam as the dominant discourse in Iran (1998, p.59). Unlike her secular counterparts, Najmabadi holds the view that women’s decisive participation in the Revolution gave women the right to challenge and even oppose the state’s gender policies. It was this new political awareness that provided women with greater social achievements and opened “new possibilities for growth of all kinds of feminisms—including secular” within Iranian society (Najmabadi 1998, p.60).

Mir-Hosseini on the other hand, challenges some of Moghadam’s conclusions on the two opposing camps and also speaks of the decline of Islamic feminism in gender discourses in Iran:

I myself started to have problems with the term ‘Islamic feminism’, when Valentine Moghadam wrote her 2000 piece [...] There she categorised me, along with Afsaneh Najamabadi and Nayereh Tohidi, as a ‘protagonist’ of Islamic feminism, set against Haideh Moghissi and Hamed Shahidian as antagonists, and sought to resolve the issue from what she presented as the meta level of ‘feminism’ – as though her own position gave her the right to do so (2011, p.72).

Mir-Hosseini argues that, her recent cautious approach toward Islamic feminism – which reveals a shift from her previous works – stems from the growing controversy around both Islam and feminism as being two equally contested concepts. This increase in oppositions towards Islamic feminism, Mir-Hosseini suggests, is a consequence of the Western interventions in the Middle East (namely Afghanistan and Iraq) under the name of democracy and women’s rights

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<sup>11</sup> Seedat (2013) refers to Haideh Moghissi as the most adamant of advocates against the convergence of Islam and feminism.

which not only expanded the gap between the 'ideals' and 'realities' of human rights, but also promoted accusations against both Islam and feminism.

Shahrzad Mojab (2001), among the antagonists of Islamist feminism, strongly criticises Islamic feminists and particularly Homa Hoodfar for defending Islam rather than women's rights. Mojab's core belief is that "Islam cannot be degenderized into a neutral observer of gender relations" (2001, p.137). She opposes Islamic feminist's approach on the basis of mainly three reasons: first, for separating patriarchal laws from Islam, second, for trying to "secularize the patriarchy of Islamic law" and third, for introducing religion as the "engine of identity formation" to Muslim women (2001, p.137). Suggesting the separation of state and law from religion, Mojab, thus, rejects Islamic feminism for accepting the state's boundaries on gender relations and seeking gender equality within these boundaries.

In her discussion of Islamic feminism, Mojab associates Islamic feminists with their liberal counterparts in seeking a separation between 'law' and "the exercise of political power" (2001, p.138). She argues that both Islamic and liberal feminists look at the law as a neutral and not patriarchal force and locate "social power in the state rather than the people" (2001, p.138). She even goes so far as to say that the discourses on Islamic feminism offer a somewhat higher level of essentialism than those of Western liberal feminism:

Unlike Western liberalism, which has succeeded in instituting an extensive regime of rights guaranteeing legal equality, 'Islamic feminism' is not even ambitious enough to demand universal formal equality. This feminism has not, for instance, challenged the extremely oppressive laws which treat non-Muslim women and men pejoratively as *ahl-e zamme*, i.e. 'non-Muslims who paid tribute to the Moslems' (2001, p.139).

In the wake of recent events in Iran, Islamic feminism has reportedly experienced a setback. Sadeghi (2010) argues that one main problem facing Islamic feminism was a lack of support from the majority of Iranian women for its approach in addressing the concerns of only 'religious middle-class women'. Sadeghi suggests that the marginalisation of Islamic feminism coincided with the rise of the Reform movement led by president Khatami. At this time, many ordinary women sought a greater participation in political processes in order to challenge not only gender discrimination, but also other forms of discrimination based upon ethnicity and class. As the Reform movement provided women with these opportunities, Sadeghi writes, Islamic feminism was pushed to the margins. Thus, with many women's rights advocates finding positions in

government or parliament, it was the government who became the main proponent of women's rights advocacy rather than the women themselves. Some scholars (for instance Kolaee 2012) use this to defend the performance of the Reformist government. Kolaee, the former female parliamentarian during Khatami's presidency, emphasises the government's role in improving women's status in the following statement:

During the reformist government of Khatami, many women found an opportunity to enter a number of decision-making positions in political parties. The office of the Presidential Advisor for women's affairs was renamed and called the Centre for Women's Participation. [...] Women's participation in civil society organizations was encouraged by the government and increased women's socio-political roles. In 2000, the Third Plan for Economic Development allocated considerable budgets for the empowerments of NGOs as civil society organisations (2012, p.139).

Abrahamian's (2008) similarly considers the liberal parliamentarians of the Reform period – and not the women's rights activists or a combination of the two – the main agents for the changes in women's position:

the liberal deputies also made a pitch for women's support. They allowed women to study abroad on state scholarships; [...]. They even passed bills directly contradicting traditional interpretations of the shari'a. They reopened the judiciary to women. They gave them equal rights in divorce courts and permitted them to have custody rights over children under the age of seven. (2008, p.190).

The above arguments may call to mind the previous arguments around state feminism during the Pahlavi Period, as well as the state's interventions as the driving force in women's movement in pre-revolutionary Iran. Although Iran under a Reformist government and the Pahlavi regime had obvious differences in terms of sources of power, gender policies and women themselves, we can, however, see that the dependency of women's affairs on the sources of power in both periods could result in drawbacks in women's activities as a result of the change in governments. As will be discussed, there was a significant shift in women's movement under the neo-conservative government headed by Ahmadinejad, Khatami's successor.

### *Secular feminism*

Although secular feminists in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries follow similar ideological approaches, secular feminist discourse in Iran takes a rather unique position as a result of its strong



stand to both the state and Islamic feminism. Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2008) argue that secular-oriented feminism, espoused by activists such as Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji, does not assign to Islam the critical responsibility of solving women's problems in Iran and instead presents an alternative to feminist strategies which is not based on Islamic sources.

Paidar uses the term 'secularist' as a substitute for 'secular' to refer to these feminists, arguing that "secularist identity is a consciously chosen political identity that constructs secularism as the main political dividing line in the context of Iran" whereas secular identity in the context of Iran is a much looser and more flexible social identity that does not necessarily revolve around secularism" (2001, p.29). Secularist feminists, Paidar argues, cover a wide range of views, often in opposition to each other, and follow diverse political agendas such as *socialist*, *monarchist*, *social democrat*, *liberal nationalist*, *culturalist* and *radical feminist*. She also holds the view that despite their vast disagreements, secular feminists all have in common an opposition to the compatibility of Islam and feminism, and an understanding of the limits of Islam, as a divine ideology, on women's position.

Iranian secular feminists, in a similar way to their Islamic counterparts, are believed to follow liberal middle-class approaches (Sadeghi 2010) which fail to address the demands of the majority of Iranian women. Sadeghi even criticises some secular feminist approaches for being "irrelevant" to the Iranian context:

in recent years some feminist scholars have published books and papers praising "lipstick jihad" [...] and "sexual revolution" [...] and admiring Iranian youth for resisting patriarchal rule (2010, p.7).

These strategies, as Sadeghi reports, are not acknowledged by the majority of Iranian women. This is because for many women in Iran, Sadeghi writes, "individual religious identity [...] has little to do with their political projects and participation" (2010, p.7). In other words, although many women may seek a higher political participation in the society, they may also avoid the feminist discourses (whether secular or Islamist) that address their 'religious' identity.

The One Million Signatures Campaign – a campaign organised by women in Iran which aimed to collect one million signatures in support of changing laws in favour of women – is discussed by some scholars as the most prominent feminist act in post-revolutionary Iran. The campaign used a number of 'transnational practices' such as the use of websites and social

networks (mainly Facebook), interviews with foreign media, travel to international conferences, and relationships with the diaspora to gain support from the international audience (McKibben 2010). McKibben (2010) and Sameh (2014) view this use of the transnational methods as a double-edged sword: they expanded the audience for the campaign's message and heightened its visibility in the Western world which brought about moral and financial supports<sup>12</sup> and invitations for public talks in international conferences from the Western feminists, foreign governments and diaspora groups (such as the Iranian Monarchist Movement).

It is however believed that such approaches put the campaign at the risk of decline within the country: firstly, the international fame made it easier for the Iranian state to target activists inside Iran and increased the risk of charges of foreign influence or traitorous behaviour being brought from the state (McKibben 2010 and Sameh 2014). Secondly, they were rejected by women from middle and lower classes or women belonging to ethnic minorities who were "uninterested in feminism or secularism as a social identity at the centre of an action program" (Sadeghi 2010, p.9). According to data gathered in the spring of 2009, only nineteen percent of Tehran residents, mainly from the upper and middle classes, were aware of the existence of the One Million Signature Campaign, with few pledging support (Sadeghi 2010).

### *Islamist Women*

Islamist women, also referred to as *fundamentalist* (Mir-Hosseini 2011) and *conservative* women (Barlow and Akbarzadeh 2008), gained more visibility within women's rights advocacy following a series of tensions between feminists (from both camps) and the neo-conservative government under Ahmadinejad. The clash was so profound to the extent that many NGOs – the legacies of the liberal Khatami – were closed down (Kolaee 2012) and women's rights campaigns were attacked (Tajali 2015). There are a number of explanations for the suppression of feminist movement in this period.

Sameh (2014) relates the government's crackdown under Ahmadinejad to mechanisms of imperialism and the U.S. interventions (mainly the designation of Iran as part of the axis of evil

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<sup>12</sup> In 2009, it received the Global Women's Rights Award from the Feminist Majority Foundation and an award from *Glamour* magazine and was the recipient of the European Simone de Beauvoir Award for Women's Freedom (Sameh 2014).

under George W. Bush and then isolation and sanctions under Barack Obama) that pushed back the Iranian state through a discourse of anti-imperialism. Povey (2012) sheds light on the same issue from another angle. She argues that the US government's aspiration to improve human rights through NGOs and the emergence of what she refers to as 'fake' or 'US-funded' NGOs resulted in the suppression of all other NGOs.

Thus without the active presence of Islamic and secular feminists, Islamic conservative women found their way into political power. There is generally a lack of comprehensive research on women from conservative parties or women who took state positions during Ahmadinejad's presidency. Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2008)'s study provides us with some insights about Islamist women. Holding high positions in the political realm themselves, many conservative members of the parliament have, however, emphasised women's presence in the private domain as opposed to the public arena (Barlow and Akbarzadeh 2008). After the coming to power of hardliners, thirteen women were elected as members in the parliament, with twelve of these women being conservative (Barlow and Akbarzadeh 2008). Barlow and Akbarzadeh argue that conservative women opposed to the accomplishments of the women of the previous parliament (mainly Reformist women), such as the bill regarding Iran's joining of CEDAW. Despite this opposition to their Reformist encounters, Islamist women contributed to the introduction of the first female post-revolutionary minister in Iran. Tajali (2015) explains the importance of this appointment as such:

in Iran, the first post-revolutionary female minister was not nominated by a reformist government despite their promise to increase women's access to this position, but rather by President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a neoconservative who rarely addressed women's issues in his campaigns (2015, p.656).

In her research Tajali has found that, Islamist women justified women's access to positions of authority through references to the Qur'anic verses or the women-friendly statements of Ayatollah Khomeini. They mostly belonged to Jaame Zeinab (Zeinab Society), Iran's largest and perhaps most active Islamic women's political organisation (and also one of the oldest) which later formed a coalition with former female politicians from the Reformist camp (Tajali 2015).

Tajali also hold the view that the practices that Islamist women employ to achieve their goals – for example appointment of the first female minister – are very different from those of their secular or Reformist counterparts. These strategies, which include pressuring, lobbying and convincing male political leaders to advance their goal of awarding women their 'true Islamic

rights', Tajali writes, are in fact in contrast with feminist approaches. While criticizing the state for a departure from its initial revolutionary ideals through discriminating against women in decision-making, Islamist women distance themselves from feminist women's rights groups, the international feminist community and the human rights agreements.

As mentioned before, unlike the discourses on feminism in Iran, there is little published research and detailed analysis on Islamist women as well as the most recent changes in women's rights advocacy in Iran. Notwithstanding limitations, the above discussions suggest that the gender policies in Iran, rather than being rigid and fixed, have experienced changes due to the unique internal and external circumstances. On one hand, women were subjected to extreme Islamisation processes after the Revolution which stripped away the previously granted rights. On the other hand, they experienced the gradual liberalisation processes in the post-war period. During the terms of the less conservative governments, the regime's need for democratic legitimation provided women with more opportunities to interact with the government. Ghamari-Tabrizi explains these transformations as such:

as much as the Islamisation project transformed society, this social transformation also reconfigured the meaning of the shari'a and expanded the boundaries of communities with interpretive authority over its legal injunctions (2013 p.237).

Women's efforts and constant claims have made it costly for the regime to ignore their demands (Vakil 2011). The tensions between feminism and the ideological systems produced different approaches to women's rights advocacy – feminist or Islamist – and transformed women into active social participants. However, for many, the most important shift in Iranian women's rights advocacy is that for many of these women the dominant discourse has changed from 'anti-imperialism' into the language of women's rights (Sullivan 1998):

Just as Big Oil, the United States, and the shah had no intention of producing an Islamic Revolution, so too the Islamic Revolution had no intention of producing its unintended effect: a potential that, though compromised, is realizing itself in a kind of woman's movement specific to and produced by its historical moment (Sullivan 1998, p.236).

## **Chapter 5: By Way of Conclusion: Towards a Framework to Study Women's Subjective Field in Iran**

Part I of this research has so far studied women's position in the Middle East in private and public realms, their political participations and emancipatory struggles in the context of the opposition between capitalist globalisation and Islamisation. Chapter four investigated the role of the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iran in creating and/or developing women's activism and more generally their political participation in Iran. The existing literature, as we have seen, highlights the role of the Islamic Revolution (and consequently the Islamisation of the country) as the main driving force propelling political awareness and activism among Iranian women. It was also argued that the school of Islamic modernism, which rejects Western culture while appreciating women's political participation and their right to work and education, has fostered a new subjectivity in Iranian women in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution.

This new female Islamic-modern subjectivity was significantly determined by its rejection of not only traditional Islam, with its confinement of women to passivity and subordination, but also the secular Westernised conception of women; seeing both of them as outsider elements. According to the current literature, three important changes happened at the end of the Iran-Iraq War and after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini: the first was a moderation trend in the state's gender policies and the emergence of Islamist women from the ruling strata who became representatives of a 'civic piety' and suggested a new woman-centred interpretation of Islamic texts. The second was of a capitalist nature and it involved what can be called the growth of individualism in women with the liberalisation of markets and the subsequent growth of women's participation in education and the labour market. The third change was what can be called 'NGO-isation', which took place alongside the empowerment of civil society organisations, a rise in women's collective actions, and particularly the emergence of Islamist feminist discourse, in opposition to both secular feminists and Islamists.

Part I of this thesis, thus, examined the idea that Islamisation and capitalist globalisation forces are in conflict over the making of women's identities and that women are themselves carriers of these forces. I have insisted on the complex dynamics whereby these forces, far from being external to one another, are on the contrary interdependent and closely intertwined – they are, to put it bluntly but justly, accomplices. Almost all the existing literature seemed to be one

way or another focused on such an opposition, or on different aspects thereof, which was often understood in ways closer to the problematic idea of binary opposition or otherwise without fully disclosing the aforementioned dynamics.

Preparing and undertaking the fieldwork, however, helped us to realise that women's position in Iranian society (and elsewhere in the world) can be better understood by focusing on the subjective field, as women's position is much more complicated than usually assumed in the literature, and can by no means be adequately grasped through the dynamics involved in the interplay between capitalist globalisation and Islamisation processes, not to mention the inadequacy involved in resorting to that or other oppositions when they are conceptualised in a binary and rather simplistic manner, as is sometimes the case in the literature. This inadequacy in the literature can be likened to 'a piece of clothing' with a 'small hole' in it. It initially looks fine, however, the more the thread is pulled, the bigger the hole becomes. This metaphor is used here to show the insufficiency of the current literature and as it seems the whole field has been asking the wrong question.

The purpose of the current section is to expose the nature of this gap in the literature by reviewing nine studies which are particularly focused on the position of women in Muslim countries, their engagement in social-political movements and struggles, and above all the subjectivities they carry. These studies introduce new models and classifications that are often not confined to the opposition between capitalism and Islamism, and this is, essentially, what has interest for the current research. The models used in these studies, as I show below, are clearly insufficient to grasp the complexity of women's subjective field and their position in society and thus they never develop a full picture which could portray the liveliness and dynamism of the subjective field.

Among these nine studies, three (Vakil 2011, Honarbin-Holliday 2008, Sullivan 1998) were conducted on Iranian women and are particularly chosen here, even if two of them have already been mentioned (in the case of Honarbin-Holliday's) or reviewed in some detail and partly drawn on for our own framework (in the case of Sullivan's important study), because of their similarity with the current research. The other six studies (Deeb 2006, Jad 2011, already reviewed in some detail, Ababneh 2014, El-Mahdi 2010, Jamal 2009, and Jouili 2011, already mentioned),

centre on other Muslim contexts, and have in particular been selected on account of their specific focus on women's subjectivities in Muslim countries.

Vakil's book, *Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, draws attention to the "components of change in Iranian politics and society" "through the prism of gender" (2011, p.7). Therefore, by focusing on women, activism, and gender issues she tries to "shed a light on the larger dynamics and dialect of politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran" (2011, p.7). She also depicts the evolution of women's activism in post-revolution Iran, in a historical context with chapters on each presidential period. Vakil thus characterizes and defines women's movements in Iran during Khomeini, Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadi Nejad and Rouhani's leaderships separately.

Having interviewed women from a wide range of politico-ideological views including female parliamentarians, journalists, students, lawyers, housewives, professors, preachers, artists and teachers, Vakil suggests three general typologies of women's rights activists – traditional, Islamist and secular – based on the political and religious leanings of the women she interviewed. She writes that in the aftermath of the Revolution, activist women consisted of only two groups: traditionalists, the supporters of the regime who "embraced Islamization and traditional gender roles", and secularists, the opponents of Islamisation (2011, p.66). Later on, in the second decade and as a result of the "political and economic failures of the first decade", Vakil argues, some traditional women "splintered and evolved into Islamic women" who supported reforms in Islamic gender policies and were "more accepting of the feminist and secular discourse" (2011, p.66). In arguing about the evolution of traditional women into Islamist women, she explains the socio-political changes among conservative women that took place over "many gender-biased policies of the Islamic government" (2011, p.83).

Vakil's classification of women's rights activists has been based on defining and illustrating the strategies, goals and differences of each group. Despite trying to avoid generalisations by arguing that "there is no monolithic group of women in Iran, indeed it is impossible to make generalizations about Iranian women" (2011, p.8), the study does not manage to avoid a considerable level of simplification. The reason is that the categorisation of women tends to overlook the changing, dynamic, and tension-laden nature of the realm of women's desires, aspirations, and struggles. This is particularly true in the case of many women normally

categorised as Islamist (as is the case for one of the participants of the current study) who underwent major shifts in their political and even religious views years after the Revolution.

Another problem with Vakil's and other similar studies is that women in such studies are mainly categorised on the basis of their relationship with and position towards the state, which leads these studies to view religion in rather statist terms. Furthermore, such studies overlook the complex nature of the relationships between Islamism and capitalism, modernity and tradition – a complexity which often results in women being driven by different and even contradictory desires. I will return to this later, as it is at the core of the current study.

Mehri Honarbin-Holliday's work, *Becoming Visible in Iran* (2008), also provides constructive contributions to the field of women's identities, autonomy and agency through which she reflects the lived experiences of individual women in contemporary Iranian society. Honarbin's work studies women's subjective determinations and how their quests for visibility and their negotiations over their positions within society could make a difference and bring about change in Iranian society. The change Honarbin speaks about is, however, different from what is acknowledged as a favourable change in this thesis. A desirable status for women in the current study is accomplishing a society in which men and women, and indeed all human beings are treated as equal; whereas Honarbin's aim is related to "the country's journey towards a more developed democratic egalitarian civil society" (2008, p.5). In other words, while the main concern in the current research is challenging women's subordinate status in society and achieving greater equality, Honarbin emphasises pluralistic democracy and civil society values as liberal prescriptions that will improve women's status.

Honarbin tends to idealise the everyday lives of middle-class ordinary women as 'resistance' and as a part of a 'collective action' that will lead to change in society, as if for most Iranian women this was a main priority. All women in her study, regardless of age, religiosity, social-class, and education have a great desire to change the social and political system in a democratic direction. They are constantly trying to find ways to resist limitations and "communicate their critical position" (2008, p.5). While women in Vakil's research fall into distinct categories based on their religious beliefs and their association with the state, for Honarbin a majority of Iranian women who participate in the collective action against the patriarchal system,



defy the latter's restrictions, and "refuse to apply censorship and insist on thinking freely" (2008, p.71):

They [women] have set out to construct the scaffolding for new perspectives and beginnings, questioning their individual as well as collective status in the legal system. Such adjustment and regulating of the interface of self and society further reflects their collective desire and ability in electing and applying unfixed and fluid gender boundaries (2008, p.5).

The current study, on the other hand, will show that different subjective determinations can lead women into different directions which are not necessarily emancipatory. For instance, while Azam (one of my interviewees) supports the Islamic regime in Iran and seeks power through it, for Mahtab (another participant of this research) living for equality is a primary concern. Another issue with Honarbin's study is that she avoids a direct reference to the position of the state towards women, its gender policies, and the nature of its restrictions over women. In other words, instead of seeing the women-state relationship as a dynamic exchange, where the state's boundaries have been adjusted throughout the decades after the Revolution, Honarbin portrays a 'static' image of the system of ruling in Iran that constantly forces women to regulate themselves to its demands.

Zohreh Sullivan's work, 'Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran', a chapter of Lila Abu-Lughod's book, *Remaking Women, Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (1998), is rather shorter and briefer than the two above mentioned studies, but very important in my view. In this study Sullivan explores how women's lives in Iran have been formed "in the crossfire of tradition, change, and modernity" (1998, p.221). Her study greatly relies on public and private oral narratives she collected in the 1990s from Iranian émigrés and exiles. The chosen women exclusively belong to educated middle and upper-class strata who were born in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Sullivan's study investigates, first, the opposition between modernity and tradition, on the one hand, and on the other Islamism, before and during the Islamic Revolution, and, secondly she considers the interplay between Islamism and emancipatory elements in post-Revolutionary times. One important aspect of Sullivan's study, an aspect which makes it rather similar to the current research and differentiates it from both Vakil's and Honarbin's, is that it explains how the concept of womanhood in Iranian society has changed in a historical context.

The first conception is that of the *modern woman*, which was formed during the Pahlavi era when concepts such as modernity and feminism were introduced (or rather imposed) in traditional society. The modernised woman of this period, Sullivan argues, is only partially modernised, and is thus still strongly bound to patriarchy. To explain this type of womanhood further, Sullivan reflects on the personal experience of three women whose “temperament and life were formed in the crossfire of tradition, change, and modernity” (1998, p. 221). During this time, Sullivan argues, women began their activities through “the formation of organizations, the opening of girls’ schools and the publication of women’s periodicals” (1998, p. 222). One of them is Zia Ashraf Nasr, the granddaughter of Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri, a well-known cleric who is famous for his anti-modernity views. Sullivan refers to Zia as “a deeply religious woman who sees no contradiction between Islamic philosophy and the freedom of women in the public sphere, she renarrativized the progeny of the Prophet” (p.221).

Sullivan then explains how the states’ imposed modernity fuelled the formation of a second type of womanhood: a revolutionary model of *Islamic womanhood* which was mainly introduced to the society through Islamist modern theorists such as Ali Shariati. A Muslim revolutionary female subject was on one hand an alternative “to the Pahlavis’ “westoxicated” images of woman” (p.217) as she had “power and agency to construct” (p.219) herself as a warrior. But, on the other hand, she was at the same time determined to comply with the motherhood role that Islam has requested her to fulfil.

The third type of womanhood in Sullivan’s work was formed in post-revolutionary times due to the “unintended effect” (p.236) of both the Revolution and “the strictures against women” (p.234). Sullivan describes it as a kind of movement that women have begun “not only to have an active presence in politics but also to carve out new possibilities for themselves in social, legal, and political life through public debate in women’s magazines, through social and civic activism, and through public office” (p.234). This third type of womanhood – which Sullivan seems to admire – is neither “returning to a past narrative” nor is it trying to repeat “a Western model of feminism” (p.236).

While the current study shares some commonalities with the above studies, there are aspects that make this investigation different and new. In a similar way to Sullivan’s work, the current study ‘avoids’ binary thinking. This means not so much avoiding contrasting references between, for example women and the patriarchal system; modernity and traditionalism; and/or

secular and religious women, as the binary thinking involved above all in assuming that the opposing terms are external forces to one another. In a similar way to Honarbin's research, this study also explains that within the dynamics of the state and women, the dominance of the state's gender policies, while securing the consent of some women, fuels the desire for emancipation in other women.

Islah Jad (2011) has studied women's level and nature of participation in political activities against Israeli occupation in Palestine and derived four categories based on the opposition between modernity and tradition as well as the one between secularism and religion. The first group of women in Jad's work are those who participate in charitable activities in the West Bank in the organisations that are structurally very similar to the old type charities during the British mandate. The cultural activities these women undertake are on the one hand different from those of nationalist and feminist groups, and on the other, they don't have a desire to be involved in political activities the way Islamist women do.

The second category are women who stay at home, do not involve themselves with socio-political activities and comply with the traditional gender roles. The third group consist of Islamist women who participate in political activities in the female branch of Hamas in Gaza. They are representatives of 'the modern Islamic woman' which is formed within Hamas' contradictory gender ideology: women who while living "as model mothers and obedient wives", are educated, professional, and politically active (2011, p.180). The fourth group includes secular women who in a similar way to their Islamist counterparts are educated and professional and work for NGOs or nationalist organisations. The discourse used by feminist NGOs, Jad writes, is based on a "liberal, individualistic notion of rights" (2011, p.196) and secularism is vastly accused by the Islamists for its tendency towards Westernisation.

In her study, Jad mainly highlights and examines the distinctions between Islamist women and women who comply with both the traditional values and secular feminists. The main difference between Islamist and traditional women is their approach towards modernity. Islamist women, Jad argues, emphasise their distinction from traditional women by highlighting their education, profession, and political activities as well as their dress code: "They [Islamist women] see the new Islamic dress as a uniform of conviction superior to thub [the traditional women's dress] which presents the blind adherence to tradition" (2011, p.180). Concerning the opposition between

Islamists and secular feminists, Jad shows that while the Islamists try to delegitimise the non-Islamic groups by associating them to the West, they nevertheless try to incorporate themselves in the discourse of women's rights that they borrowed from the secular discourse.

Sara Ababneh (2014) similarly investigates the opposition and confrontation between women's rights activists, and female Islamists of Hamas in Palestine where both sides try to "impose their worldviews as the only legitimate objective form of women's empowerment" (2014, p.49). Ababneh argues that female Islamists and feminists both similarly reclaim "the space of decision-making" although their different social class and level of Westernisation lead them into choosing different political approaches (2014, p.49). While the feminists have "the power of hegemonic discourse of international sphere" on their side, the female Islamists are "supported by the power of 'hegemonic' discourse of Islam" (2014, p.49).

Based on interviews with secular feminists of 'Women for Democracy' in Egypt, Rabab El-Mahdi's (2010) research examines the practices and approaches that secular feminists and Islamists apply to mobilise gender based movements in Egypt. She argues that while the Islamist groups try to control women's activism by co-opting it into Islamic frameworks, the secular activists have different sets of aspirations for women's mobilisation which are "colonized and represented in terms of a global feminism that is pre-dominantly white-liberal" (2010, p.396). El-Mahdi's work essentially questions the view of the two desires as mutually exclusive in the current literature that forces women to choose either of those: the desire for liberation, emancipation and rights versus the tendency towards subordination to religious patriarchy:

Why are those two different sets of desires seen as mutually exclusive? In other words, why are women or a woman of the South perceived as having to choose between equality, freedom and emancipation on the one hand, and living in a close family or in a godly way on the other? [...] Why cannot a woman from the South be entitled to both, i.e. equality in a close family? (2010, p.395).

Lara Deeb (2006) has examined new forms of piety in a global modern context in Al-Dahiyya, an area in Beirut which is inhabited by an urban pious modern community. When religion is marked by the concept of progress in the global political context, Deeb argues, it changes the meanings of faith and modernity. Deeb's model opposes modernity to tradition and secularism to religion, although the main opposition in her work is the former. Deeb suggests the formation of a 'spiritual modernity', a religiosity incorporated into and marked by modernity, which is in

opposition to secular modernity (which is referred to in her work as Westernised modern) on one hand and tradition on the other hand.

Amina Jamal (2009) has examined the complex meanings of ‘the modern’ in Islamist women through examining their understandings of the self. To do this, she has conducted interviews with a group of Islamist women in the Jamaat-e-Islami group in Pakistan. Instead of relying on the “dichotomy of secular modernizers and religious traditionalists” (2009, p.11), or seeing the Islamist movement as anti-modern or pre-modern Jamal’s research examines the Islamist group’s “attempt to bring into existence a new relationship with colonial, that is, Western, modernity” (2009, p.11). The research participants, educated middle-class professional Islamist women, Jamal writes, “fight for the rights of women but distinguish their activism from feminism” (2009, p.12).

Jeanette Jouili’s (2011) study examined different aspects of subjectivities (mainly understood as the result of interplay between modernity and religion) in female members of the Islamic revival movement in France and Germany. She found that not only do Islamist women tend to critically intervene in connection with secular modern concepts such as “personal autonomy, freedom, self-realization and equality”, but they are “themselves also partially shaped by it” (2011, p.49):

My interlocutors spoke not exclusively in terms of virtue and piety, but also in the idiom of the liberal norms in relation to which they sought to position themselves (2011, p.50).

Taken together, the above studies rely on a theoretical framework which is mainly based on the opposition between religion and Western secularism, and the one between modernity and tradition. The latter six studies have particularly investigated the opposition of *Islamist* women – the women who try to introduce a religious discourse to the concepts of modern – to, first, *secular feminists* whose attitudes and conduct are attributed by the Islamist to the West, and, second, *traditional* women who are submissive to the traditional gender roles.

The main problem with this model, an opposition between religion and Western secularism on the one hand and modernity and tradition on the other, is that it misses the role of emancipatory elements as an engine of social change and the dynamics that they create in society as a result of their opposition to capitalism. Since a great deal of what is happening in the Middle East (and indeed elsewhere in the world) is a result of the struggle between capitalism and equality,

disregarding these forces can drastically limit our understanding of society as a whole. Thus the capitalism-emancipation opposition which is missed in the above studies can tell us a lot about Islamist movements; what they are against, or what they strive for (equality, freedom and/or power); the main impulse behind the conduct of Islamist women, and why they support Islamist groups.

It was this new understanding that led to further develop of the framework of this thesis to deepen its ability to grasp what moves women in Iran, and by extension women in other Muslim countries. The new framework treats the initial opposition (between capitalist globalisation and Islamisation) as in part insufficient and inadequate to unravel the complexity of the subjective field and the dynamics defining it. Indeed, that opposition between globalisation and Islamisation can largely be considered, even in our initial understanding of it, as involving a very complex dynamic by no means limited to simple binary, a false one.

As will be discussed later on, the true or real opposition is that between capitalism and emancipation. This makes *explicit the dimension of emancipation*, already present in the initial framework of this thesis, as a force seeking to escape from the entanglements involved in the opposition between capitalist globalisation and Islamisation, as providing the basis for the true opposition. In addition, the opposition between modernity and tradition is also considered fundamental, so much so that it will become the second major dimension of the improved framework on which part II of the thesis is based (this makes explicit something that was already central in the initial framework, and consequently the object of important analyses and reflections in reviewing the literature). While in the initial framework religion is considered as the main form of tradition, in the new model other forms of tradition such as nationalism and ethnic tribal cultures are seen as almost as important as religion, even if politically the latter is clearly dominant.

This new model not only explains the nature of the relationship between the Iranian state (Sharia based laws in a liberalised economy) and women but is useful for explaining the dynamic and in part fluid nature of the subjective field, as well as tensions and changes in women's convictions. It can, for instance, deal with changes in women's subjectivities during and after the Revolution in Iran and explains how the demand for liberty, equality, and freedom by many women at the time of the Revolution shifted away from equality to either an *Islamist* subjectivity or to what, following Alain Badiou (2016a), is being conceptualised as a *subjectivity of desire for the*

*West*. As will be explained later, this provides the new model of this research with a great capacity to be applied to other Muslim contexts or to be used to explore Islamist organisations such as those mentioned in the above studies.

What makes the new two-dimensional framework of this thesis particularly significant (see Figure 1 in page 86) is, first, the understanding that Iranian women are exposed to, and are active agents in shaping, a structured combination of forces that drive them along certain pathways and against others, and, second, the conceptualisation of subjectivities (e.g. Islamist subjectivity) as resulting from the interplay of two main subjective determinations (capitalism and traditionalism in the case of an Islamist subjectivity) which often involve, in addition, strong feelings against other determinations (modernity and emancipation in the aforementioned example). An important task in this study consists, therefore, in finding out and categorising the desires, convictions, and ambitions in women that lead to different levels of subordination or emancipation.

Another important implication of the new framework is that modern concepts such as feminism and women's emancipation are also recast in terms of how women as well as the state respond to and react against one another. As will be explained later on, the reactions to feminism and emancipation, on one hand, and to capitalism and religion, on the other, not only define and redefine the boundary between women and the ruling system, but also produce differences between women themselves. The new framework gives the reader the chance to have a better understanding of what concepts such as religion, secularity, modernity, and feminism mean for Iranian women, without being obliged to look at these issues exclusively through the prism of Western approaches. Above all it helps to avoid the simplistic binary oppositions between supposedly external forces, and instead allows us to see the complex interdependent relations between such forces in a dynamic field.

## **PART II – FIELD WORK**

### **Introduction: An Overview of the Women's Subjective Field**

If preparing for the field work had already made me aware of the crucial importance of the subjective field, the field work itself and an initial analysis of the twenty-two interviewees showed that there were clearly identifiable subjective forces at work in women's conduct and lives. Forces which had mainly to do with capitalism and modernity, and thus with the usual capitalist and modern aspirations such as having a good job, consuming valued goods, being independent, as well as religion and tradition, for example being a Muslim woman, being a good Muslim mother and/or wife. And what I must call liberation or emancipation from patriarchal, religious and capitalist structures of domination, a liberation or emancipation which involved in different ways and to different extents the idea of equality, including gender equality or equality between women and men and potentially reaching up to equality between all human beings, as a major orientation in different forms of women's activism and social-political engagement, and the different interaction effects between these forces.

As was already pointed out in the previous chapter, this realisation led me to develop further and in part change the initial framework used in the literature review (Part I of this thesis). The fundamental idea underpinning the new framework is that in reality the subjective field of the contemporary world (and this obviously includes both the Eastern and the Western worlds), cannot be adequately approached and conceptualised by means of a single opposition (or, as the studies reviewed at the end of Part I suggested, by a series of single oppositions), no matter how complex and nuanced its conceptualisation may be (this is what was done in Part I of this thesis, where I relied on the opposition between capitalist globalisation processes and Islamisation processes, and understood women's fundamental situation as being essentially caught in the complex dynamics involved in that opposition). This led me to develop a two-dimensional framework to portray the subjective field concerning women's subjectivities in Iran, although this framework can also be used to analyse other national or regional subjective fields.

The new framework was developed on the basis of two main interrelated operations: first by undertaking a further conceptualisation of the studies that were analysed in the last chapter of



Part I, and, second, by adapting Alain Badiou's (2015) framework<sup>13</sup> to portray what he calls the subjective structure of the contemporary world. Badiou's scheme is constituted by two perpendicular axes: "one which opposes modernity to the traditional universe, on the vertical axis; and another one which opposes capitalism" to what he refers to as "communism, or emancipatory politics" (2016b<sup>14</sup>, p.116). This provides what he calls the four main subjective determinations: capitalism, emancipation, modernity and tradition. Badiou (2016a) suggests four main subjectivities that are essentially produced by his model for the contemporary structure of the world. Each subjectivity in this scheme is the blend and the result of the interplay between two subjective determinations. In this way, the dynamics of the four determinations in Badiou's scheme produces four main subjectivities in the world.

One is *Western subjectivity*, the result of the interplay between capitalism and modernity in Badiou's model. This subjectivity is essentially the subjectivity of the middle class in the West or the defenders of the modern way of life. Western subjectivity is the conviction that Westerners, those who are on one hand satisfied with their privileged lives, the voters of the liberal-democratic governments, the consumers of the gigantic multinational businesses and the viewers of the mass media present the modern lifestyle to the rest of the world as the only way of life. These same middle-class people are, on the other hand, in a constant fear of losing their middle-class advantages. Badiou describes the Western subjectivity as a "dialectical relation between an extreme arrogant self-satisfaction and a constant fear" (2016a, p.46).

In the non-Western world, Western subjectivity becomes the subjectivity of *desire for the West*, the conviction that the Western way of life is the best – a conviction entertained not only by non-Western middle classes but also by a part of the destitute masses who envy the Western way of life. The subjectivity of desire for the West is the desire to possess the "luxury of the West" and copy and adopt "middle-class behaviour and habits of consumption, without having the means to do so" (Badiou 2016a, p.49). *Nihilist* subjectivity – the other side of the coin of the desire for the West or in other words a 'suppressed' desire for the West – is the result of the interplay between

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13 The resort to Alain Badiou's work came as a result of its direct significance for our thesis once I was clear about the critical, decisive importance of the subjective field to better grasp the position and role of women in Iranian society.

14 The translations of this work by Badiou, originally published in French, have been provided by Carlos Frade.

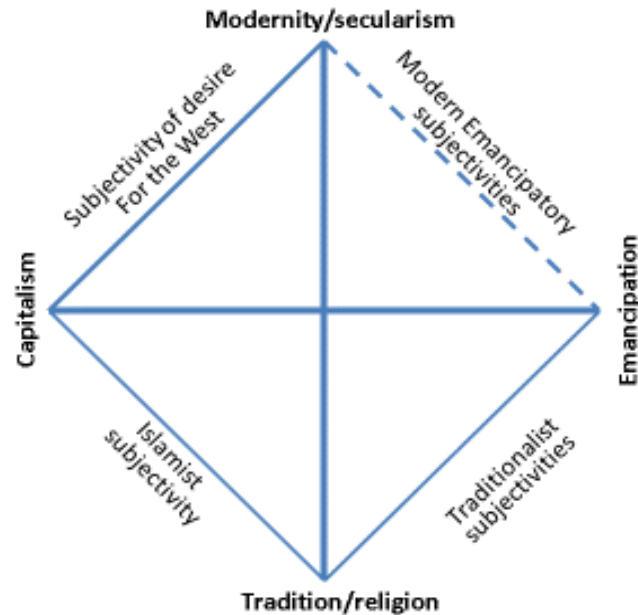
tradition and capitalism (poles) in Badiou's scheme. It represents the tendency to revenge and a desire for destruction as a direct reaction to the Western way of life and desire for the West.

Badiou (2015) situates these three subjectivities in opposition to *emancipatory* subjectivity or communism, which he refers to as an alternative for structuring the world and humanity's ultimate destiny. Badiou leaves the modernity-emancipation side of his diagram (which implies a communism capable of modernity) open as no historically significant forms of politics have ever experienced it. The centre-point of the scheme, where the two axes cross, is what Badiou refers to as the "ambiguity [or uncertainty] of contemporary subjectivities" for it is at this crossing point that the subjectivities "are pulled by four determinations and not only two", so that they emerge out of the conflicting interplay between the four subjective determinations (Badiou, 2016b, p.116).

On the basis of the aforementioned empirical studies that have been reviewed in chapter five and of Badiou's framework, I suggest here two dimensions that structure the women's subjective field in Iran – and arguably in other countries, Muslim and non-Muslim, with some variations (See Figure 1). The horizontal dimension, similar to Badiou's framework, portrays the opposition between global capitalism and emancipation.

The vertical dimension is defined by the opposition between modernity/secularism and tradition/religion. The twofold names of these two subjective poles or determinations are meant to grasp a crucial dynamics: that modernity can be subordinated to or at least strongly marked by capitalism; this can be called 'capitalist modernity' and it involves all the external signs of being modern (e.g. lifestyles, use of modern technologies) as well as the internal ones (individualism, individual freedoms, e.g. of opinion, as a consumer). Badiou describes capitalist modernity in terms of individualistic autonomy, the dissolution of stability and traditions, "the unlimited promotion of individual freedom, the dynamics of interests, the exclusive, structuring appearance of the subject before the market and so on." (2015, p.127). The capitalist modernity is in strong opposition to the modernity which is marked by emancipation, which I call 'emancipatory modernity'. An emancipatory modernity will above all involve real respect for and defence of equality, as well as a secular attitude. 'Secularism' is used here in opposition to religion, an opposition which may imply a non-religious attitude or a consideration of religion as a private matter.

**Figure 1 –Structure of Women’s Subjective Field in Iran**



On the other side is the tradition/religion pole which, in a similar way to modernity, could be in two forms. Firstly there is the tradition subordinated to capitalism which reveals the fact that capitalism constitutively requires a legitimating support from tradition (family, nation, identitarian values, patriarchalism, and of course religion itself). This capitalist tradition attempts to maintain the identities constituted by tradition; as Badiou argues, the “identitarian element” of tradition is in strong opposition to emancipation (2016b, p.117). Secondly, and crucially, there are actually attempts to develop pathways which in part may be considered as emancipatory through (in theory renewed) forms of religion.

The structuring of Iranian women’s subjective field in the current research is thus thought of as the result of the interplay between all four subjective poles or determinations present in the framework. The centre point of our scheme as portrayed in Figure1 above, is that the crossing point where subjectivities are pulled by more than two determinations. The four main subjectivities thus emerging are the result of the interplay between the four subjective determinations. They are: Islamist subjectivity, subjectivity of desire for the West, traditionalist subjectivities and modern emancipatory subjectivity, although the latter only appears in this study (as indeed they tend to do in the contemporary world) in the form of modern emancipatory aspects and elements (with equality at their core) rather than a full-fledged ‘emancipatory subjectivity’. Let us start by a brief description of these four major subjectivities as they emerge from my interviews:

An *Islamist* subjectivity is the result of the interplay between capitalism and tradition – above all a *state* form religion. Islamist subjectivity includes a strong tendency to support and maintain the religious values in the way the Iranian state seeks to present and maintain them. While the Islamist subjectivity is formally and externally against what is coming from West, in reality what it is opposed to and what it fears is any egalitarian ideas – particularly feminist egalitarianism – that question the very basis of the state and thus of the regime. A *subjectivity of desire for the West* is a strong desire for living one's life based on a capitalist model of success which includes an endless effort to achieve higher educational qualification and better career prospects as well as to increase one's individual freedom, have access to technological advancements and gain social prestige. Women driven by this subjectivity – which are mainly from middle class strata – are well aware of their rights in society and try not to allow other people violate them but they have less or no desire at all to be a part of collective endeavours that challenge patriarchy and inequalities in society.

Situated in the side tradition-emancipation, but much closer to tradition/religion than to emancipation, there are *traditionalist subjectivities*, which involve a strong desire in individuals to follow and support different forms of tradition (particularly those related to nationalist sentiments, local and ethnic culture and religious values). Traditionalist subjectivities are manifested in strong convictions for avoiding sins and sinful temptations, participation in charitable works, helping others and a sense of benevolence and compassion towards others on the basis of religious values and morals. A major aspect of this subjectivity is its opposition to the distinguishing Islamist thirst for power and the typical middle-class' individualism; it is also opposed (although normally to a lesser extent) to emancipatory initiatives seeking equality and of a secular character.

Finally the side linking emancipation and modernity, which I name *emancipatory subjectivity*, consists in the tendency to see other human beings beyond the identities defined for them by the state, the patriarchal system or society, as well as in denying any superiority of some human beings over others as a result of their gender, religion, race or nationality. A majority of women who appear in this study as carriers of emancipatory determinations are educated and belong to the intellectual classes conceived of in a broad sense; many of them are in fact women's rights activists. This, however, does not mean that these women are driven by a full-fledged

emancipatory subjectivity in their everyday lives, but only by different emancipatory aspects and elements which, as will be discussed later, may or may not be manifested in the form of activism.

This framework, highly dynamic in my view, allows us, first of all, to examine with a certain depth how the desires and convictions carried by Iranian women constitute a structured field where changes are possible and even frequent but they follow a logic. Explaining this logic and showing the structured and structuring nature of the subjective field are central contributions of the framework. Second, this model shows that a woman's desires can gravitate towards one particular subjectivity at a given time although other tendencies can exist in her simultaneously. In other words, among the different and often strong tendencies that propel a woman in her personal and social life, one conviction may prove stronger than the others at the time of making her major life decisions.

Third, the two dimensional model also shows that during their lifetimes and depending on different socio-political contexts, women can be pulled and pushed by different subjective determinations, so that the subjective dispositions they carry can undergo significant transformations, including a complete change in the subjectivity. Thus, not only can a woman be the carrier of different tendencies at a particular period of time, but she may also be driven by various subjectivities in different periods of her life. Molood, one of the participants of this research, is a good example of such a change, as she went from being a religious woman who supported Ayatollah Khomeini at the time of the Revolution to becoming a secular critic of the regime who has been in jail for defending feminism. Fourth, the model used in this study thus shows to have the capacity to explain *historical* changes in women's main convictions. It can explain, for instance, how grandmothers, mothers and daughters from the same family can be driven by rather different and sometimes *opposite* subjectivities.

After this brief description of the four major subjectivities as they emerge from the interviews with Iranian women, the following chapters aim to provide the results of these interviews, approached and analysed through the lenses of the two-dimensional framework of this thesis, itself resulting from an initial analysis of the interviews in conjunction with Badiou's critical inspiration. Each section also provides evidence from the interviews including regular quotes from the interviewees, paraphrases of what the interviewed women said, and elaborations on them. A

full description in terms of standard sociological characteristics of the twenty-two interviewees is provided in Appendix 3.

The first chapter of Part II (Chapter six) is dedicated to the research design, methodology and the details of the procedures put in place to find and select participants. In this study, women have been chosen from different religious and political views, age range and social class, while the interviews have been conducted so as to draw from each participant their ultimate intentions, desires and reactions towards the forces of capitalism, modernity, Islamisation and emancipation or, as I could perhaps also say, the desire for equality.

Chapter seven is the central one regarding the substance of the empirical field work; it therefore, focuses on the substantive results of the field work. It provides in-depth analyses of the interviews and tries to map out women's subjectivities. This mapping of subjectivities, although preliminary and in need for a broader investigation, is relatively new and above all is a contribution, in my view, to filling the lacunae and gaps found in the literature, particularly two: the lack of any dynamic model able to portray the dynamic nature of the subjective field, and the near absence of a specific theorisation of emancipation and its interaction with capitalism, Islamism, tradition and modernity.

## **Chapter 6: Interviews with Iranian Women: Research Strategy and Design**

A significant number of studies regarding the situation of women in Iran have been published in post-revolutionary Iran mainly in areas such as law, job market, domestic violence and women's rights and movements. There are two main methodological and contextual issues in studying women's situation in Iran. Firstly, many of the authors with significant publications on Iranian women are Iranian academics who live abroad and for various reasons they have used secondary and tertiary sources for their research.

A majority of the authors of these studies, typically academics based in Western universities, are unable to travel to Iran due to the likely risk of being detained. The latest case was Homa Hoodfar, Iranian-Canadian professor of anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal, who was recently released after spending several months in jail for researching female politicians in Iran. Cases like this and the fact that such restrictions have increased in post-Ahmadi Nejad period, are among the reasons for the scholars to avoid seeking first-hand knowledge. As a result, a majority of studies in this field rely on other researchers' original data, news from the media or women's journals that are published inside Iran.

The other issue in this field has to do with the fact that the number of studies that are published from inside Iran are rather limited. Since many academics in Iran understandably have the fear of losing their jobs, they avoid doing research on certain topics in fields such as gender equality and feminism that have a direct association with both religion and politics, including the sharia law, which involves both. The same reasons explain the situation regarding feminism: since any association with feminism in Iran is considered as a threat to the state, those few studies on gender inequality that are published inside Iran may not be done and written with the minimal freedom of enquiry needed to do scientific studies – although one should not exaggerate the existence of such freedom in non-Muslim countries, this is surely an important limitation. As a result, there is a lack of research on Iranian women based on field work and primary sources. This issue is particularly evident in the research done in the last few years as a result of the state's increasing restrictions.

Vakil (2011) writes about the difficulties of doing research on women-related topics in Iran. Based on Vakil's account and considering the sensitivity of gender studies in Iran, it can be

argued that gender, nationality and the religious views of the researcher are generally among the important factors which define the relation and the interaction between the researcher and the participants. Vakil explains both dark and bright sides of her nationality (Iranian-American) and gender (a female researcher) in conducting the interviews. In terms of gender, she argues, being a woman in Iran gave her an informal permission to, firstly, have an access to gatherings, parties and other female-only places that otherwise she would not be allowed to enter; and, secondly, it allowed her to have an exchange with traditional or conservative Islamist women who would be rather reluctant to talk to a male researcher.

Being an Iranian-American, Vakil found it difficult to reach out and schedule interviews with mainly “politically active or politically connected Islamist women” (2011, p.12). Many of these women, for instance, cancelled the meetings at the last minute or were reluctant for a voice recording during the interview, they “spoke in coded innuendos or deflected questions on domestic issues” (2011, p.12), or suspiciously inquired about her background, her connections abroad and her religious views as an Iranian-American citizen. Considering the fact that the current study is also based in a Western country and the researcher is based outside Iran, a similar set of issues affected this research; I will refer to them later on.

### **The selection process**

Twenty two women (see Appendix 1) were interviewed face-to-face in Tehran. In addition informal but substantial exchanges took place with women attending public events such as a book launch event in central Tehran where many political activists had participated, women in friendly or family gatherings as well as a female taxi driver.

Due to the limitations of full-time doctoral study, the main study interviews were held within a relatively short time period and the participants were mainly chosen from women who live in Tehran or the cities closer to it. Other locations far away from Tehran were discounted on account of the fact that travelling there could take up to twenty hours or more. Tehran itself is a very large city and the processes of finding participants and organising meetings and attending the places that were accessible by the interviewer and the interviewees were difficult, time consuming and complicated by itself. Considering the time and budget limitations, choosing Tehran as the main field site had a number of benefits. First of all, people from various social class and religious



backgrounds live in Tehran. Moreover, the fact that Tehran is a multi-cultural city makes it easier to have access to women who were born and raised in other cities and who have moved to Tehran for work.

A snowball sampling method was used in order to find participants. The women who were interviewed were selected on the basis of advice and suggestions provided by acquaintances and previous contacts. Among the twenty two women, I knew and had met some before the interview. Molood, Pooran and Shahnaz (interviewees have been anonymised and their names are fictitious; see Appendix 1) are well known activists and their contact details could be found online or in social media, the rest of participants were introduced to me through friends or other participants. Some women were initially reluctant to be interviewed but then agreed to the interview when they were given more explanation about the interview and its process. In what concerns the selection process, a number of factors were considered important:

- Level of education and the participants' social class
- Age, distinguishing in particular between more mature women who participated in the Islamic Revolution (or at least lived through it and had therefore an experience thereof) and younger women born after the Revolution.
- Level of activism, distinguishing women's rights activists from ordinary women.
- Religious versus secular orientation: the religious views of the participants were also a factor that contributed to identifying their political views and level of activism.

A number of considerations had to be taken into account in analysing the position of women on the basis of these factors. First, some factors such as religious views, level of activism and feminist orientation of the interviewees can form a continuum. This is particularly valid for the participants' religious views as it is difficult to categorise women as either religious or secular. One reason is that in a country like Iran, where there is extra sensitivity regarding the citizens' religious and political beliefs, many women avoid a direct reference to their religious views, political positions or their level/form of activism. It is worth mentioning in this respect that a majority of the interviewed women have chosen a combination of both secular and religious practices for their everyday lives. For instance, they may have secular views on hijab whereby they

don't see it as something valuable for women, while they still believe in other forms of Islamic practices such as praying or fasting. The secular versus religious dimensions therefore spanned from women who are completely free from religious beliefs to women who consider themselves as Muslim but are secular in some aspects, and conservative/Islamist women who have adopted a dogmatic interpretation of Islam and reject secular beliefs.

Observation of women's conduct when they don't have the eyes of state on them is important to better ascertain their religious orientation. Thus the interviewees' appearance (the degree to which they covered their hair, used make up and wore fashionable clothes) was carefully considered in addition to their responses to and ways of talking about religion. All this is also indicative of how they want to be perceived, when there is no pressure on them to conform in any particular way. The interviews with Mahin, Bita, Sarah, Mona, Samira, Maryam, Soori, Molood, Pooran, Azam and Shahnaz were conducted either in their homes or their own offices where their male relatives or colleagues were present in the same or other rooms. Among these women Bita, Sarah, Mona, Soori and Molood did not cover their hair with a head scarf during the interview and Bita, Sarah, Mona and Soori wore fashionable outfits.

With regard to the age span of women interviewed, five participated in the Revolution and seventeen did not; ten women were born before the Revolution and twelve after the Revolution. Eleven were religious and eleven secular. As regards activism, nine were activist and thirteen non-activist (see Appendix 3).

### **The interview process**

Interviews took place in places such as cafes or the interviewees' work places and homes which were agreed on and selected by both the participants and the interviewer. Two pilot interviews were conducted to understand the personal issues that could arise during the conversations, as well as to explore how the interviewees felt and responded to the interview situation. Interviews lasted between twenty minutes (a few of them) and two hours (a majority of them). Before conducting the actual interviews, the research participants were given as much information as might be needed to make a decision about whether or not they wished to participate in the study. They were also informed about the aims of the research, the research process, and the researcher. Since a majority of participants could not read English, they were given a consent form translated into Farsi so that

they could understand about the research and their rights. When interviewees consented, interviews were recorded, all but one was recorded.

Interviews were established in an open-ended conversational style. The structured interview style – and thus a restricted set of questions – was avoided in order to achieve a maximum of spontaneity in the interactions. The type of interview conducted corresponds fairly well to what is known as semi-structured *open-ended* interview, designed and conducted on the basis of an Interview Guide, which covered fairly specific topics (see Appendix 2). The order in which such issues were discussed varied depending on the interviewees' take on each issue and on the interview situation as a whole. This means that the interviews developed to a large extent as a conversation in which the interviewer's role was to trigger the interviewees' views and, as said, make sure that the fundamental issues were discussed.

Although a similar wording was used from interviewee to interviewee, questions were rephrased or reformulated when it was needed and questions that were not included in the interview guide were asked from time to time. This is an absolutely crucial aspect in a research like this one, which focuses on exploring the field and developing an initial conceptualisation. In some cases, when it was considered that the interview was incomplete in some respects, or some issues had not been touched upon, follow up questions were asked through phone and email.

There were of course a number of limitations and risks in the interview situation which should be taken into account. Normally interviews started with more general questions related to how the participant spends an ordinary day or how she deals with her everyday life issues. As mentioned in the interview guide (see Appendix 2), after a minimal level of trust was built, more sensitive issues such as hijab and feminism were brought out. When inconsistencies between different answers emerged, the issue or topic under discussion was addressed in a different way so that a clearer view or answer could be formulated by the interviewee. However, if an interviewee was not willing to answer specific questions, the researcher would change the topic. Among the twenty two participants, such a situation happened only in the case of Badri whose answers were sometimes relatively ambiguous. It was also important to maintain this flexible approach, which was, as emphasised above, the main aim of the interview guide.

Second, considering the sensitivity of the issues regarding human rights and women in Iran, the question of *privacy* was crucial during and after the interview processes. To avoid the identification of the participants, not only are pseudonyms used throughout the thesis, but also any information that could lead to the possible identification of the interviewees (including their publications, names of the organisations they work for and even the history of their political activities) were carefully eliminated from the research. All the recordings, transcripts and paper records have been kept in secure accommodation where only the researcher has access to them and will be destroyed after the researcher's graduation.

Third, there was a *time limitation* in some cases, as some interviewees had other duties to fulfil. The interview with women's rights activists and the interviewees with busy schedules had to be finished in a limited time. There was a general time restriction for most participants. As a result, while their answers at the beginning of the interviews were more detailed and longer, they spent less time (and energy) on their answers towards the end. As a result an attempt was made to ensure as much topics as possible were covered in that limited time. Regarding the time of the interviews, the interviews mainly took place during the day time when public transport was more accessible and traveling for both the interviewer and participants was safer.

The interview *location* was the fourth issue that had to be taken into consideration. Since the participants were chosen from different social classes as well as political and religious views, choosing a right place for the interviews involved a number of limitations. First of all, it required had to be somewhere with minimum distraction where both the researcher and interviewer would feel safe and secure to engage in the conversations.

The interviews with the friends of friends where there was a previous familiarity between the interviewer and the interviewee took place in the houses of mutual friends. Mahin, Bita, Sarah, Mona, Samira, Maryam, Soori were interviewed in quiet rooms inside mutual friend's houses. The interviews with women's rights activists took place in their offices and the rest of participants were interviewed in public places such as cafes or their work places. Since Zahra, Ozra, Fatima and Roghieh live in areas with high rates of crimes, there were limitations in terms of choosing interview places. It could not, for instance, take place in a café or restaurant due to the concern of safety. Zahra was interviewed in the school where she works and the other three women were interviewed on the premises of a charity from whom they receive support.

Fifth, an attempt was made to conduct the interviews in as careful a way as possible. Thus, in order to avoid being representative of a specific ideology or religious views, the interviewer's appearance, manners and body language had to be carefully selected. More religious participants were likely to wear black chador to cover up their hair and body completely without the use of makeup. The younger less religious women, on the other hand, were more likely to wear trendy clothes and use more makeup and ornaments. The interviewer's outfits were chosen carefully, neutral colours such as black and brown were worn and tight clothes, heavy makeup and flashy colours were avoided

Of course the interview included several very sensitive issues which sometimes posed problems – indeed such sensitive issues were at the very heart of the interview process. Thus, speaking about certain topics such as feminism, hijab or the Revolution would make some participants nervous and sometimes even angry. This very conduct is often highly symptomatic and thus most significant in terms of interview results and findings. But leaving this aside, what must be said here is that in such circumstances (uneasiness, nervousness, anger), if it was felt that the topics could be reformulated or approached in a different way, they were, otherwise the interview moved on to other topics. I must add that there was one interview (the one with Badri) which was very short as she was very reluctant to talk about the main issues which are the object of the interview on the basis that this research is being conducted in or from a Western country – and Badri had a very anti-Western stance, as is often the case of women who are driven by a strong Islamist subjectivity.

On a few occasions lack of privacy during the interview was an issue. For example, during the interview with Badri other women including her assistant were present and her answers were sometimes interrupted by their comments. Mona's fiancé insisted on being present during the interview and his presence perhaps influenced Mona's answers. The interview with Nazanin took place in a noisy café that she had chosen where loud music was sometimes interrupting the course of interview. Conversations with Ozra and Roghieh were also disturbed by the office staff of the charity where the interview took place as once one of them was adamant about expressing her opinion on about the issue of hijab. The interview with Zaynab had to take place on the pavement because she, as a street seller, and did not want to miss the opportunity to sell her goods during the

interview time, which can certainly be understood. Yet, the interview flowed relatively fine and Zaynab was able to express her views.

## Chapter 7: Women's Subjectivities: Mapping Women's Subjectivities

### Islamist Subjectivity

An Islamist subjectivity is the result of the interplay between the tradition/religion and the capitalism poles in the scheme of the structure of women's subjective field in Iran (see figure 1). It indicates a strong disposition towards religion on one hand and a rejection of the Western modernity, both capitalist modernity (although this rejection is more external or declaratory than real) and any form of what I call emancipatory modernity on the other hand. The current section consists of two main parts. The first part will examine the tendency to keep, support and even promote identitarian forms and religious traditions as the core aspect of the Islamist subjectivity. It will be shown that, however, the tradition, when combined with and subordinated to capitalism, can propel individuals to seek power using religion (and other forms of tradition) as an instrument. In the second part it will be argued that the Islamist subjectivity relies on the dynamic interplay between religion and a suppressed desire for the West combined with partial acceptance of it. Being dynamic in this context means that different women, as is the case for Azam and Badri, two of our interviewed women, can be propelled by these desires in different ways and at different levels.

Azam is a well-educated middle-class woman in her late fifties. She was suggested for an interview by Pooran who also participated in this study. Azam's dominant convictions are well fitted to the interplay of religion and capitalism poles in our scheme: she has a strong tendency towards politicised religion or the version of Islam that the Islamic Revolution offers, a strong anti-feminist approach and a compromising mind-set towards modern tools and technology. Badri for her part is also a middle-class, educated woman in her early sixties who is Islamist conservative but of the Principlist line.<sup>15</sup> She has had several state positions in women's affairs in

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<sup>15</sup> The Principlist camp in Iran, according to Bakhash (2011), emerged from the right-leaning conservatives after they lost their integrity due to coming to power of the Reformists. They are mostly strongly compliant to the supreme leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei and faithful to the foundations of the Revolution in Iran. While the Reformist camp suggests religious and constitutional changes within the regime, the Principlists tend to keep the status quo and reject any reforms (Bakhash 2011).

Ahmadinejad's Principlist government, but currently has none in Mr. Rouhani's moderate cabinet.<sup>16</sup> Badri is currently a member of a well-known Islamist all-female association.

Both women wear the state-endorsed type of hijab – black chador –, both are provided with financial support from the state and both are often labelled as Islamist or conservative in Iranian society. Although Badri was introduced for interview by Azam and they presumably have enough in common to have some friendly relations, Badri is more conservative and presents a stronger anti-West sentiment than Azam. Since the Principlists in Iran are more radical in their Islamist approaches than the other conservatives, the very fact that Badri belongs to the Principlist camp reveals that she is driven by conservative Islamism to a greater extent than Azam. The interview with Azam took place in her office. She displayed a friendly and positive attitude towards both the interview and the interviewer and answered all the questions with passion and patience despite the fact that she knew the research is being performed in a Western country. The interview with Badri took place at the office of the well-known Islamist association where she works and during the interview some of her colleagues were present, which instantly created a heavy atmosphere for the interview.

As explained above, a strong desire for keeping and preserving tradition is a fundamental component of the Islamist subjectivity – which as will be explained later is also a main component of the traditionalist subjectivities. The tendency to keep tradition as a strong element of the Islamist subjectivity has, however, two main differences with this tendency as the core element of the traditionalist subjectivities. The first difference is that the support of tradition by the Islamists is almost certainly associated with *seeking power*. For women driven by Islamist subjectivity in Iran, supporting the state's gender policies is a way of almost securing their access to financial help and state positions. Thus a majority of Islamist women in Iran are unsurprisingly from the ruling strata. In speaking about male authorities Azam maintained that: “the money and power are in their hands. Why should we (women) fight with them?”

The Islamist subjectivity is thus a strong conviction towards capitalist tradition i.e. the tradition that is subordinated to capitalism. When the tradition is combined with and connected to

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<sup>16</sup> The Moderation and Development Party that President Rouhani belongs to is also loyal to Islam and the Islamic Revolution but takes a less conformist approach than classic conservatives and has close relations with the Reformists.



capitalism, Badiou (2015) writes, it can become hegemonic and create in people cravings for power and desires to maintain allegedly traditional values. All movements, ideologies, ultra nationalist tendencies and religious views which operate in an identitarian framework, as Badiou (2015) describes them, are efforts in order to gain power through maintaining the tradition. Thus the Islamist subjectivity propels in women the emphasis on aspects of tradition that help them gain power.

This is certainly true in the case of Azam. Her strong bonds with tradition manifests itself at two levels: one is a sense of satisfaction about what she does and a tendency to maintain the status quo and a return to the true self. Azam does not talk about change in women's current situation; on the contrary, she believes that Iranian women already have what they need to have. She tends to highlight both the Islamic and Iranian identities of women and argues that if women acknowledge, see and use the potentials that the Iranian society has provided for women (and it has always had) they could improve their situation. She seems to be consciously accepting both patriarchy and hierarchy within the system. Although her main career is supposedly regarding women, she, however, neither expressed her concerns about women's issues during the interview nor did she criticise the ruling system for its gender policies.

There is a mutual relationship between Azam (and women like her) and the state based on the benefit they have to each other. On one hand the system of power nurtures its advocates. This state support is evident in Azam's generous access to public resources: she runs a website for women with a state-backed fund for which she has a large office and considerable number of staff employed. On the other hand Azam supports both the Islamic Revolution and the state. She is enthusiastic about the Revolution and really liked to talk about it.

Azam sees herself indebted to the Revolution as she believes it was the Revolution that brought her to the public arenas and gave her power. As a result and since the victory of the Revolution, she has been trying to promote not only Khomeini's message for women but also the Islamic regime itself. Her reason for participating in the Revolution (at a young age) might have initially been defending her religious values against Westernisation of the country as well as supporting the Revolution's religious leader but eventually, this initial motive changed to a sturdy sense of responsibility towards and support for the Revolution. This means that she became attached to it and all her other desires were directed and influenced by the strong passion for the

Revolution. In fact the Revolution inspired Azam to change her religious tendencies to religious-political ones. Azam sees both her current status and identity as a product of the Revolution:

All my intellectual foundation has been associated with the Revolution. I was a religious woman before the Revolution. I had read many of Shariati's books at high school. My father was a supporter of Imam Khomeini and so I was. I mean from the beginning I was raised in a middle class religious family in which being political was very important.

The second major difference between the support for the tradition in Islamist subjectivity and the other subjectivities is that although traditions stand for any identitarian tendencies with nationalist, linguistic, religious and cultural traits, the Islamist subjectivity is mainly about preserving Islamic values. The Islamist subjectivity in Iranian society can be mistaken for a strong or genuine religiosity; nonetheless it is much more, perhaps only, an instrumental use of religion at the service of a quest for power. Thus the Islamist subjectivity is not just about an adherence to Islamic principles, values and traditions, but is also about promoting, indeed imposing these principles as part of a power politics involving and commending, adhering to and supporting the centre/s of power. Being religious for Islamist women is not merely a matter of performing religious rituals. It is instead mostly a question of defending, supporting and ultimately imposing the system of valuation that the Islamic Republic in Iran is based upon. Hijab, for instance, is a particularly important factor in this system of valuation by which Islamist women signal their affiliation with other women or with men.

Like many other Iranian women Azam has strong religious tendencies but what makes her distinct from other (ordinary) religious women who adhere to Islamic rituals is her contribution in political affairs. Azam is particularly obsessed with the idea of "Muslim revolutionary woman", what she refers to as the Ayatollah Khomeini's ideal for Iranian women. A *Muslim revolutionary woman* in this regard is a woman who, while being modest and veiled and aware of her motherhood and wifehood roles, has an active role in the socio-political currents of her society and no men, neither her father nor her husband, can take this role from her:

One of the most important messages of the Revolution – that I see myself and a large group of women a product of it – was that a woman has not a secondary role but a substantial role in the development of her society [...]. Imam Khomeini theorised the concept of Islamic revolutionary woman: she is a woman who is not waiting for a permission from her husband or father to have a role in the political developments.

A Muslim revolutionary woman, the way Azam describes her, is a modern woman but neither modernised, nor westernised. This way of being modern is not in line with emancipatory modernity, nor is compatible with what most forms of Western feminism defend. It is modern as it encompasses a divergence and a change from the mind-set of women of previous generations, that is, the traditional women who required men's permission for their social interactions. Azam, for instance, does not see herself obliged to seek her husband's permission to be active in political arenas or any activities that supports the Islamic regime in Iran. However, Azam's perception of being modern might seem peculiar, or unusual from a Western view.

Taken together, therefore, what lies at the heart of the Islamist subjectivity is the participation in power politics in order to preserve the tradition and gaining power through this participation. This participation in power politics at the same time fosters Azam's religiosity. In other words being labelled and recognised as an Islamist woman compels Azam to externalise her religious tendencies more than ordinary religious women. She, for instance, wears the black chador and constantly tries to defend and promote the religious values. What makes Azam a typical example of an Islamist woman, or a woman strongly driven by Islamist subjectivity in the first place, is that she combines both an active participation in the state political sphere and an active support for the Islamic order:

After the Revolution I lived abroad for two years because of my husband's education [...]. I was a member of Islamic student association in Europe and had political and organisational activities in that period. The Islamic student association was the political and intellectual arm of the Islamic Revolution in Europe. [...] I then joined the *Zan-e- Rooz* (Woman of the day) women's magazine because of my passion for writing. Since then I have always been active in media. [...] I am now running a website for women.

The second main aspect of an Islamist subjectivity is a rejection of desire for the West insofar as one expresses an external or discursive hostility and even an aggressive conduct towards anything that supposedly comes from West. For instance, during the interview, Badri was evidently doubtful and cautious about cooperating with a research which is ultimately a Western product. In answering a question about a comparison between the different generations of women (Badri, her mother and grandmother's approaches), she replies:

The questions you are asking are particularly psychological questions [that are designed to get information from me]. You might be innocent or unaware of what is going on, but those who are guiding you from abroad know what they are doing. They are doing it on purpose.

The Islamist subjectivity, in fact, relies on nurturing the Iranian regime's anti-*Western* propaganda which particularly manifests itself through a strong rejection of feminism. This anti-feminist approach can certainly be seen in Azam. Her rejection of feminism and her disapproval of feminists stem from different motives. She, firstly, criticises feminists for what she believes to be a denial of "womanhood" and "femininity" by them:

A Muslim revolutionary woman is first of all a 'woman'. According to the Revolution's legacy and Imam Khomeini's reading of Islam, for this woman her feminine identity is of great importance and she is very pleased with her womanhood. This is exactly the opposite of what feminists and pseudo-feminists think. They neither like their womanhood nor do they want to be a woman. [...]. We say motherhood is different with fatherhood. We don't try to devalue motherhood or avoid it, the way feminists, especially those belong to the first-wave do.

Azam also rejects feminism for she believes that it does not belong to Iranian society and any advance in women's status should be based on local (Iranian and Islamic) models. Her reason is that Iranian society has traditionally carried a great potential for honouring and supporting women. She therefore holds the view that women in Iran are provided with various opportunities for growth and the only thing they need to do is to recognise, see, and use those opportunities. Azam argued that feminists deny such capacities and the development they seek is based on Western models:

Feminists look for models and solutions for change and women's growth from outside the country [...]. A sustainable development should be based upon a society's indigenous capacities. If it is dictated by another society it won't be sustainable. It may help the economy but not the individuals because it is not localised. You [women] should use the opportunity of living in a society that still has great reverence for women. I used this chance and launched a website [for myself]. Instead of seeing this potential, feminists constantly moan that the women [in Iran] are under repression.

She also argues that feminists' main concern is not merely women's issues in Iran but instead, their secret agenda is to oppose and to overthrow the regime with the cooperation of the Western countries:

Unfortunately in Iran feminist movements are tied to political oppositions. It has been detrimental to women's status. You [feminists] start a movement to reduce women's issues then you say a naïve feminist comment. What would happen? The man who is sitting on the other side of the table (the male authorities) should help me [to solve women's issues], he has money and power, why should I make him my enemy?

This section has so far spoken about the hostility to the West as the second main component of the Islamist subjectivity. Arguably, at a deeper level, a desire for it and its suppression may constitute the two sides of the same coin. This hostility to the West, according to Badiou (2016a, p.50), is constituted against what comes from the West “only because desire for the West is its hidden shadow”. In other words, a rejection of what comes from the West forms “a couplet that gravitates, like a positive and negative version, around the fascination exerted by Western domination” (Badiou 2016a, p.50). One might express a strong rejection of Western modernity, while being inspired and even directly influenced by what one tries to suppress.

It seems that by rejecting the Western lifestyle an Islamist woman probably tries to suppress the desire for the West and fascination for modernity which according to Badiou is “already present” (2016a, p.50) in her. For instance, she might partially reject aspects of modernity which are related to womanhood and gender roles and yet accept other aspects of capitalist modernity – that are in line or confirm her beliefs or are in some way beneficiary for her. Despite her strong anti-feminism tendency, Azam uses aspects of modernity (capitalist modernity) that favour her goals. She believes that modern technology (commodities, transportation, cinema etc.) “are there to be used”. She even argues that changes are inevitable in a given society and that a contemporary woman cannot live the way her grandmother lived. Modernity for Azam is a means and a secondary goal that serves the primary goal and the principle (the tradition and mainly the religious values). In other words, she believes that women are free to use modern technology as long as they remain loyal to their religious views:

Modernity is a line of change that has come from the West and has already arrived. It has not waited for our permission to enter our borders. On the other side, we have our Islamic and Iranian traditions. [...] There are women for instance who visit holy shrines to ask holy Imams to solve their problems. On the other hand, modernity tells these women that if you want to be a modern looking woman you have to wear certain cloths which are different with what women used to wear 50 years ago. She has her religious beliefs – which is sometimes stronger than mine – but she does not believe in wearing hijab. This loose hijab is only one aspect of her life. I don't think it is contradiction, instead I think modernity has created diversity in our society.

Jeffrey Herf's (1984) term, *reactionary modernist*, may help to describe these inner conflicts in an apt way. Herf initially used the term for German society to refer to people who “combined a great enthusiasm for modern technology with a rejection of the enlightenment and the values and institutions of liberal democracy”. In his later work (2009), Herf expanded the

scope of the term to other contexts including post-revolutionary Iran. Herf's account explains the formation of Islamic Republic in Iran by the leaders who vehemently "embraced parts of modernity and rejected others" (p.22) as such:

As it happened, I drafted that book just as Ayatollah Khomeini was calling on his fellow Iranians to "return to Islam" with the assistance of cassette tapes flown back to Iran from his Parisian exile. He exemplified my thesis (2009 p.23).

Azam is a prime example of Herf's reactionary modernist. Despite her emphasis on women's Islamic motherhood and wifeness roles in a family, Azam strongly rejects what she believes is a "reactionary religious view" which give less value to women compared to men. She believes that women should have an active presence in the public and political arena. Reactionary modernists in Herf's account are not thoroughly against modernity, instead they are willing to adapt to aspects of modernity – modern technology and tools and generally capitalist modernity – that favour their interests and help strengthen their ideological positioning.

In the case of Iranian women, this paradox may be even stronger when certain enlightenment values, (Western) social theories, rational concepts, and even quotes from particular Western thinkers are used, as they were by a number of our interviewed women, to defend traditional ideologies. During her interview, Azam used her knowledge on social science and a 'rational reasoning' to justify her ideas on Islam and the Islamic system of valuation that she was defending. For instance, Azam supported her views on Islamic gender roles using the famous Weberian concept of 'ideal type', which reflects her aptitude, at an individual level, in using Western methodology against what is coming from the West.

Azam's adoption of modern methods and secular arguments to justify and negotiate supposedly solid Islamic principles constitutes a hidden or unconscious tendency towards secularism which surely weakens the explicit principles that she defends, as it makes negotiable, justifiable, and earthly what used to be non-negotiable, sacred, and divine. This approach, i.e. using enlightened reasoning to defend Islam, can be seen beyond the participants of this research, in the larger context of the Islamic regime in Iran. In this connection, Manni Crone (2007) refers to it as "a trend towards secularism" which is a "more complex evolution from the time the project of an Islamic state was still on the table to a situation where secular considerations tend to replace religious considerations in the political sphere".

By way of summary and conclusion it can be said here that at the heart of an Islamist subjectivity there lies a strong tendency to support and maintain the religious values in the way the Iranian state seeks to present and maintain them. This means that the Islamist subjectivity's form of religiosity is strongly *statist*, an aspect often missed in the literature. Two crucial aspects here are the reinforcement of the state's ideal of womanhood and fuelling the regime's anti-West approach. While the Islamist subjectivity is formally and externally against what is coming from the West, in reality what it is opposed to and what it fears is any egalitarian ideas – particularly feminist egalitarianism – that question the very basis of the state and thus the legitimacy of the regime. As has been explained in this section, this subjectivity also involves a strong tendency to accept and reaffirm the hierarchy and patriarchy which defines the current system of power. Women carriers of this subjectivity thus not only accept the values and practices promoted by the regime, but assert and reaffirm them and, by thus doing, legitimise the regime and open for themselves a pathway to pursue and gain power.

### **Subjectivity of Desire for the West**

A subjectivity of desire for the West is a result of the interaction between modernity and capitalism, an interaction which sees modernity subordinated to capitalism. This subjectivity is a strong desire for consumerism, adopting Western ways of life and what Badiou (2015, p.127) describes as “the unlimited promotion of individual freedom, the dynamic of interests, the exclusive, structuring appearance of the subject before the market, and so on”. Although in Iranian society many working class women might be driven by this subjectivity, the majority of its carriers (including a number of the interviewees of this study) are middle-class educated women. The main three aspects of this subjectivity will be explored in this section. The first part of this section will explain that the abundant access to technological advances and modern life-style while creating in women a sense of satisfaction about their lives, gives them a feeling that acquiring financial ‘success’ requires going into an endless competition with the others.

The second part of this section will deal with the opposition between a subjectivity of desire for the West and emancipatory elements. It will explain that women driven by the subjectivity of desire for the West, while maybe aware of their rights (and sometimes seeking dominance over their male counterparts), do not normally have a desire to fight for women's rights and equality in general: some see the involvement in such activities as a potential threat to their established status,

some believe that feminists are against men and some, while respecting women's rights activities, are uninterested to take part in them. The section will finally examine the strong opposition between the desire for the West in women and their bonds with traditions (religious traditions in particular). The subjectivity of the desire for the West is in principle against traditional values whenever they limit one's individualistic freedom or access to the capitalist market. This subjectivity, despite rejecting the 'outdated' and the 'backward', as will be explained later, still tends to form strong bonds with some identitarian components of tradition. Among the women interviewed for this study, the tendency for capitalist modernity and the desire for the West is more evident in Sarah, Soori, Bita, and Mona.

Sarah, thirty five years old, is an educated, ordinary middle class woman who has a highly paid job. The interview took place in her trendy house. Soori is a (PhD) student, single and in her late twenties. In a similar way to many urban middle class women of her age, Soori has a fashionable appearance and spends a considerable time on social media to be in touch with other people. She is also a follower of some of the most recent social trends among young middle class women. She, for instance, sees herself in a competition with the others over access to better academic education and jobs and seeks to get married as late as possible in order to have enough time to obtain as much personal success as possible.

Bitu is twenty eight years old, married, educated, and middle-class with a strong ability, so she believes, to distinguish what is 'good' and what is 'bad' for her. Finally, Mona, who is thirty five years old, married, educated and middle-class. She works as an accountant in the public sector (employed by the government). She shares with the other three women typical middle class tendencies such as seeking higher education, looking for greater income, a successful marriage and generally seeking any opportunities to improve her personal life. However, compared to the two other married women (Sarah and Bitu) Mona has stronger bonds with the patriarchal order. While Bitu and Sarah see themselves in an equal (or even dominant) position in relation to their husbands, Mona, as will be explained later, seems to be more willing to accept the male headship in a family.

As stressed above, the first and probably the central feature of the subjectivity of desire for the West is creating a constant tendency in women to satisfy their demands as consumers and seek satisfaction through their economic achievements. For many women who are strongly driven by



this subjectivity, obtaining higher education and better job positions are two necessary means through which they attain material success and social prestige and have access to facilities or services which make life comfortable. Indeed, these women are more likely to study and seek occupations in more market-friendly oriented sectors such as IT, medicine and engineering – as is the case for Sarah, Soori, Bitra and Mona. Sarah is evidently driven by this subjectivity. She runs a successful business beside her job. The fact that she is not financially reliant on her husband (and seemingly has more income than him) gives her a sort of self-assurance that forms the basis for many of her responses. She has an excessive enthusiasm for ‘having more’ and living a luxurious lifestyle for which she spends tireless efforts:

I generally want to be an active person, I do not want to stay unchanged, I always want to do something, to be useful but the monetary benefits of what I do is equally important. I want to have more income because I have many expectations from life. I am ready to work even more in order to obtain those goals.

This subjectivity also involves a disposition to live according to Western models in a way that the values, ideas, methods etc. that come from the West appear to be better, more reliable and more valuable. This desire for the West goes further than seeking modern technology and living according to Western way of life. The West for those who are propelled by this desire – as very successfully conveyed by the media but not necessarily fitting how things actually are – is where democracy is, so to say, all over the place, where people live in absolute freedom and women are equal with men. Soori admires Western countries for having legal systems that support women and she thinks gender policies in Iran should be influenced by those in Western countries. Mona also believes that women’s status in Iranian society has improved, a change that she attributes to the influence of Western policies on gender:

Look at the world! In none of the European countries there is patriarchy. They [Western men and women] are mostly equal and even women’s rights are higher [than men]. They [Iranians] have learned from them. [In Iran] contemporary women have been able [to improve their status] through higher education, communication. Once less women had jobs. Women entered the society eventually. This made changes and they [women] learned that they have rights too.

This subjective form creates in women a sense of satisfaction as a result of living in modern times when more facilities are available for women and women’s rights are more appreciated. Soori expresses positive views about the overall situation of women in Iranian society and believes

that women have gradually found their place within the society and that their level of awareness is increasing. She sees all these changes a result of women's access to university, social media, TV and movies that all help them know what is happening in other countries. In talking about her mother/grandmother's generation, her overall view is that nowadays women's status is more equal to men whereas in the past men had more rights. Sarah also shows a high sense of satisfaction with the external aspects of her life as a result of obtaining her goals in education, employment and income:

I'm relatively satisfied with my status as I have always tried to have a plan in my life. I finished my studies at a right time, found a job at a right time to gain a better financial security although I still want to develop my situation especially workwise.

The other side of the coin of such a satisfaction involves entering into an endless competition with the others over material and symbolic resources. Soori has the feeling that there is a competition in the society over almost everything, from taking the best seat in a public vehicle to finding the best jobs. Such a view leads to, firstly, an endless fear of losing 'the game'. Therefore, as Soori argues, the individual feels the need to be cautious enough to avoid other people "violating her rights". Secondly, she is in a state of almost constant readiness to defend what she thinks belongs to her. Sarah is in a similar situation regarding her marriage. Despite her successful external life, Sarah complains about continuity, normalcy, lack of passion and everyday routine in her private life and the fact that long working hours have created distance between her and her husband. In fact she does not work to survive, she works to add more luxury to her life and this excessive effort, as she mentioned in an informal exchange after the interview, has not brought an extra happiness to her personal life.

The second fundamental feature of the subjectivity of desire for the West reveals its opposition to the emancipatory elements and on top of that equality. This craving to improve one's class position and social prestige which is at the core of this subjective form, leaves hardly any space for concern with social equality, let alone for participating in socio-political changes that increase equality. In other words, contrary to the emancipatory conviction which propels individuals in egalitarian ways, this subjectivity involves a major concern with leading a safe life together with conformity to the social norms and matching one's behaviours to the mainstream values.

Apparently, this lack of interest in improving social justice and equality is not always due to the women's unfamiliarity with women's rights and women's movements. Many women (and a majority of the participants of this study) are not only aware of their rights in both inside and outside the private sphere, but they also know how to claim those rights. 'Women's rights' or 'my rights' are among the expressions that were frequently used by the four participants of the current research. Soori, for instance, is very capable to defend her rights. She believes that if she is silent and does not object to the violation of her rights, people will continue using her. This feeling is growing stronger in her as she becomes older and she even blames herself for the past circumstances when she was unable of defending her rights. Bita frequently used the term 'contemporary woman' to refer to women of the present-day who experience less restrictions in all terms compared to the women of previous generations:

Contemporary women are more confident, have better communication skills. In terms of freedom, although they had more freedom to choose their outfit [before the Revolution], but in some areas women have more freedom nowadays. They speak easier, they express their opinion or disagreements more freely. It seems they are more open-minded.

The formal and informal interactions with these four women and many other Iranian women in Iran gave me the impression that many of these women see men as their competitors as if it were men as individuals, and not the patriarchal system, that has historically been the reason for women's lower status. This occasionally aggressive tendency to reclaim a woman's rights from men – mostly husbands, brothers and co-workers – should, however, be distinguished from the willingness to challenge the patriarchy.

Sarah is a good case of such a tendency. She is fully aware of her abilities, strengths and opportunities in her interactions with men. She is strongly influenced by the type of modernity that requests an equal share for women in the capitalist market and she argues that women today are eventually attaining equal roles with men in social arenas. This increasing participation of women outside the domestic realm, Sarah says, is particularly taking place in work places where the number of working women, the type of their employments and their institutional positions are improving: "some of my friends are appointed as managers in factories where such positions used to be given to men in the past". For Sarah, this improvement in women's job status has happened since women have proved their capabilities to take on greater responsibilities and as a result men can no longer ignore them. Similarly, in her private interactions, Sarah does not see herself in a

subordinate (or even equal) position with her husband. Making more money than him, Sarah feels confident having the power over her husband:

People always say to women in Iran that you should look after your husbands and be cautious so that they won't leave you. I think the opposite can happen too and this [mind-set] gives me confidence. I can leave my husband too. He should look after me and be careful too as I have a high position in the society and I am desirable for many people.

Sarah believes in women's power to the extent that in friendly gatherings she may argue with other men (relatives and friends) in order to defend women's capabilities in doing various things. She does not see her capabilities and status as of any lesser value than men's:

If my husband says for instance: 'don't do something', I would say to him that 'why shouldn't I do that when I am able of doing it?'. If one day he strongly disagrees with what I do, I don't know, maybe I put him aside instead of my job.

Bitā, likewise, argues that women nowadays have more rights compare to their mothers and grandmothers and that contemporary husbands do not put restriction on their wives as much as men used to do in the past. She links these changes to women's modern life styles, technological advances and the higher freedom of choice that children experience in their families:

My grandmother, compared to someone like me who is two generations younger, was more un-assertive and less self-conscious. In the 28 years that I have lived, I have had many different experiences, I have been more attendant in society, I have spent less time at home. Maybe in my grandmother's time, her husband would not let her go out. Staying at home all the time made her timid and woman like that could not defend her rights for sure. [...] In the last 50 years many things have changed. Women have gone out more, their social interactions have improved. If they talk with stranger men people do not blame them anymore.

Mona also holds the view that contemporary women in Iran can nowadays defend their rights better and that access to modern facilities and modern communication tools has increased this self confidence in them:

I remember in the past we were not allowed to bring our mobile phones to high schools but nowadays children in primary schools bring their mobile phones to schools. I think [change in] society and the culture, new communication technology, travelling abroad, as nowadays families travel to Europe and see the world more often, I think they are all effective [in making changes in generations of women].

The level of awareness of their rights that these four women (Sarah, Soori, Bita and Mona) expressed, however, is almost exclusively individualistic, so it does not lead to a desire in them to strive for social equality or to be involved in any process that challenges the system of power in place, or even patriarchy itself. None of these four women see themselves being involved in women's rights activism. Each woman, however, expressed different opinions towards women's rights activists, and different reasons for lack of interest in feminism.

Mona and Soori share similar and negative views towards women's rights activists. Mona does not see significant links between women's rights activism, including feminism, and the recent improvements in women's status in Iran. Instead, she believes that women have more rights nowadays primarily because they have managed to come out of their houses, actively participate in the market and social gatherings and claim those rights. Likewise, Soori believes that feminist campaigns and women's rights activists can only make limited changes in status of women in Iran as many gender related laws originate from the Sharia law and therefore are not changeable. She is seemingly reluctant to participate in any sort of women's rights activism because she thinks these activities are risky in Iran and can affect her future employment. The reason is that since holding academic positions in Iran needs a state confirmation, being a political activist might put her at the risk of employment rejection.

Bita and Sarah reflect more optimistic opinions towards activities on gender equality in Iran. Bita is fully conscious about women's rights activism and their positive influence on women's status but she is not very willing to contribute to them. She respects feminists for raising women's issues in society and defending women's rights, but she is unlikely to participate in any collective actions for women's rights:

The fact that some women came out of their houses, started doing something, organised these campaigns, [and that] they had something to say helped removing the idea that women are weak and silent or belong to the kitchens. [...] When I know that here in Iran, under the same sky, there are some strong women who can defend their rights or if there is any injustice they can defend my rights, I won't let others to ignore my rights; I would say to myself that if I can't [defend my right] there are some women who will support me, there are some campaigns who will support me.

In the same way, Sarah argues that women's rights activism has been influential on improving women's status but she expresses doubts towards feminists as she thinks they "try to be

men". Despite her successful social status, she has double standards toward women's current status in society. She, on one hand, thinks women of her grandmother's age were silent and had to spend most of their times at home. On the other hand (and despite her strong views toward women's presence in public sphere), she admits that men's traditional role as the primary breadwinners of the family could take responsibilities off women's shoulders:

The fact that women are now more present in social arenas is good but it has its own difficulties for women. I, for instance, have personally accepted many responsibilities that my grandmother did not have as it was her husband who would do those tasks. It can be a little hard for me and maybe my grandmother had an easier life regarding those aspects.

The third major aspect of the subjectivity of desire for the West is that by promoting consumerism, and encouraging the imitation of the Western lifestyle it marginalises traditions in general and religion in particular. This marginalisation incorporates the fact that traditional values remain desirable, needed or useful only when they are convenient for one's personal achievements or when they are not in conflict with one's individual freedom. Sarah's position in relation to the tradition/religion pole of the diagram (see figure 1) is typical of young professional women of her age. For instance, she avoids traditional values that become obstacles to her individual progress and success.

The two views oppose each other in Iranian society. On one hand is the modern approach which supports exercise of one's goals and desires and tries to shift society towards individualism. During informal interactions with Sarah and many other married women, they generally admitted that they are either reluctant to have any children or will plan for pregnancy after a certain age (when their career and financial expectations are attained). Similarly, there is an increasing number of young professional women (for instance Soori) who are single and at the age of marriage but are reluctant to get married. On the other hand is the traditional view that emphasises family values and compels women to get married at a certain age and plan for their pregnancy shortly after their marriage. Sarah rejects this view stating that: "women should not limit themselves to staying at home and raising children".

In answering the questions about what their mothers were doing at the same age, Sarah and (many of) the other young interviewees of this research replied that: "my mother had me when she was at my age". Likewise, Soori, being single and satisfied with it, believes that women of her

mother's generation would "devote their lives to their children" while contemporary women "live their life in a better way". What lies behind Sarah and Soori's statements is the fact that, instead of spending their time on raising children (and getting married at a young age), these women prefer to pursue their personal goals particularly those regarding better career opportunities and higher education. In a broader context it reveals a change in women's expectations and their views toward what is desirable. For instance, Sarah, being married, is not willing to "stay at home" (a phrase that she used frequently) and "do nothing". She does not see any value in staying at home purely for raising children and doing household chores when she says:

I personally want my life to be on the right track before making a decision on having a baby [...] I wanted to finish my studies, have a fulfilling job, have my own house, travel a lot before having a baby. When all of these are done I may decide to have a baby but women of my mother's generation would have their first child right after getting married.

Despite taking such an individualistic approach in the external aspects of their lives, these young women (like many other women in Iranian society) are not still willing to lose everything to modernity and would like keep aspects of tradition. Some interviewed women referred explicitly to the fact that they want to benefit from the 'good' aspects of modernity while at the same time keeping the bonds with some aspects of their traditional culture. Sarah and Bita, for instance, admitted that they would like to keep the supportive role of their families (as a favourable part of Iranian culture), as well as the peace of mind and patience that their mothers/grandmothers had as a result of living in a time before the rapid increase in modern technology.

This duality is particularly manifested in women's outlooks. On one hand many of these women (including Bita, Soori, Sarah and Mona) adopt modern outlooks by wearing the trendiest outfits or hairstyles. They, on the other hand, choose to preserve parts of tradition that might either be beneficial for them or help them being identified as cultured. One particular example of this is emphasising on their ancient (pre-Islamic) Iranian culture in opposition to Arab culture which is perceived to be backward. Wearing modern outfits and make-up and being a consumer of the latest technology, Soori emphasises her Iranian heritage to highlight the superiority of Iranian over Arab culture. She, for instance, compares the status of women in contemporary Iranian and Arab societies as such:

Iranian men have more respect for women compared to Arab men. Both Iranian men and women are now more adopted to western views I think [...] In Western perspective women

have a better place [in society]. Their lifestyle is less traditional. In say 20 years we [Iranians] will be closer to that status but some countries are not like that. For instance countries in South East Asia or Arabs are much more traditional.

This keeping of favourable parts of both modernity and tradition leads to a *selective* form of secularism: a secularism that, although it is manifested in women's outfits, does not try to eliminate religion from their public life or from their minds. For many young women wearing a headscarf in private parties, ceremonies or family gatherings is seen as rather backward. The interviews with all four women (Mona, Sarah, Soori and Bitra) took place at their houses where their relatives and friends, both men and women were present. While Muslim women are obliged to cover their hair (and body) in the presence of a non-mahram<sup>17</sup> man neither of those four women (who call themselves Muslim) wore headscarves or covered their hair in the presence of their male relatives and friends.

This form of modernity (the modernity subordinated to capitalism), however does not challenge women's beliefs in superstitions, miracles, spiritual assistance and resorting to an intermediary such as holy imams to seek help, nor does it question patriarchy. In other words, while many Iranian women see decisions on what to wear, what to study and what job to take as decisions of autonomous subject (aspects of their lives that they can directly govern or change), in other realms of their lives they may rely on chance, superstitions and magic or even the patriarchy itself. For instance, a woman with a successful external life such as Mona still accepts patriarchy in her personal life. Mona, who is a friend of Sarah, was interviewed at Sarah's house. At the time of the interview, Mona's fiancé was reluctant to allow her to speak alone and asked to be present throughout the interview. This reflects a fact about Mona and many young women like her: despite the fact that Mona is educated, has a successful job and appears to be modern, her 'man' still has a certain amount of control over her without Mona objecting to such control.

Another example of what is meant by selective secularism among Iranian women is some modern looking women's visit of holy shrines in order to seek help or miracles for their problems. Azam sees this a *diversity* which has happened as a result of modernity and not a *contradiction*:

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<sup>17</sup> All men except for her father, grandfather, brother, uncle, husband, son, son in-law, nephew, grandson etc.



[On one hand we have] modernity that has come from the West, on the other hand we have had a traditional lifestyle which partly belongs to Iranian costumes and culture and partly is Islamic [...]. Our people are still religious in their everyday lives which means that a part of their thoughts and beliefs originates from their religion. If you for instance go to Imamzadeh-Saleh which is a holy religious shrine in North Tehran, you will see there they have put a lot of chadors outside the door<sup>18</sup> as most of the female visitors don't wear chador.

This can also be seen when many women in Iran and some of the participants in our research, not adhering to main Muslim rituals, still participate in religious ceremonies. When Bita was asked if religious values (particularly prayers and hijab) could make a woman stronger, she replied:

It goes back to one's beliefs. [If I want to know whether or not religious practices make me stronger] I should first believe in doing prayers and really understand and appreciate it with my heart and then have this conversation with myself 'because my faith is stronger now, God will support me more and so now I am stronger'. I don't have that belief [in doing religious practices], so, no, I don't think it [religious practices] will help [in making women stronger]. [...] My mother, when she desperately needs help, says 'God will certainly help', so she does prayers and fasts and when her problems are solved she says 'well, who needs God?'

For Sarah, Muslim practices (including wearing hijab) do not have a link with women's inner power or their agency. She sees herself in charge of her own life and the only one who makes decisions without religion having a role in this process of decision making. Despite the traditional values which mobilise and motivate people to preserve their ideological, tribal or family bonds, for a woman like Sarah, motivation is caused by any factors that result in an advancement in her personal status. In answering a question about if religious practices can empower women Sarah argues that:

I don't think it [women's agency] is really related to [religious practices]. I personally don't believe in hijab and don't do prayers sometimes. Well I still have religious beliefs but I think I am, myself, a powerful person apart from my religious beliefs. I do many things on my own. Even in married life a lot of the decisions are made by me. I don't really think it [my agency] is really related to [religious beliefs].

This section has reviewed the main aspects of the subjectivity of desire for the West. It is firstly a strong desire for living one's life based on a capitalist model of success which includes an endless effort to achieve higher education and better career and increase one's individual

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<sup>18</sup> Women are obliged to wear chador (that covers the full body) on top of their headscarves before entering the holy shrines in Iran and women who wear only headscarves are not allowed in.

freedom, access to technological advancements and social prestige. To achieve a certain level of personal success one has to fall into a competition with those who are similarly driven by the subjectivity of desire for the West. The section also reviewed the opposition of this subjective form to other subjectivities particularly those involving emancipatory elements as well as traditionalist subjectivities. Women driven by this subjectivity – which are mainly from middle-class strata – are well aware of their rights in the society and try not to allow other people violate them but they have less or no desire to be a part of collective endeavours that challenge patriarchy and inequalities in society. These women also reject what they see as outdated and backward while still they try to keep the aspects of the tradition (religious or nationalist) that are beneficial to them.

### **Traditionalist Subjectivities**

The traditionalist subjectivities involve a strong desire in women to submit to, follow, support and promote most forms of tradition (particularly in connection with nationalist and religious values). The desire to follow and preserve the tradition in women – which is at the heart of this subjectivity – can take place in different forms: carrying out charitable and compassionate actions (mostly among middle class women), avoiding ‘sins’ and ‘ungodly’ thoughts, adhering to moralities particularly chastity and honour and defending national identity. This adherence to traditions can create in women ‘favourable’ feelings such as closeness to God, being true believers, and/or being loyal to the so-called ancient Iranian culture.

In its more vigorous way, the traditionalist subjectivities can create a constant need in women for adjusting their own thoughts and deeds so as to live their lives according to Islamic teachings or moral standards. In some women, mainly middle class women, as will be discussed, it can create the feeling of sympathy towards who are in need. This attitude of benevolence and sympathy and the desire for helping and assisting the disabled and the poor is, however, radically different, despite some perhaps misleading appearances, from an emancipatory subjectivity. Thus whereas the tendency for benevolence in the former is generally attributed to or guided by the Islamic values, the ancient Iranian culture, morals etc., the desire for emancipation is based upon “the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition” (Rancière, 1992).

A comparison between the traditionalist subjectivities and three other subjectivities – which should help to further define the former and delimit their contours – is provided in this section. In the first part of this section the traditionalist subjectivities will be compared with emancipatory modernity or any modern ideas which promote equality, but particularly gender equality to the extent that gender equality is not simply conceived of as ‘equality within the current structures’. The second comparison discusses the opposition between the traditionalist subjectivities and the capitalist modernity. By promoting togetherness and encouraging people to strengthen their family, Muslim or Iranian bonds, the traditionalist subjectivities are against the egoistic individualism, consumerism and the thirst for personal success that characterised a subjectivity of desire for the West. The third comparison is made between the subjectivity of desire for security and solace and an Islamist subjectivity: although the subjectivity of desire for security and solace is generally in favour of keeping and promoting the traditions, it is against that aspect of Islamist subjectivity that drives people to seek power by the means of religion.

Among the women interviewed for this study, ten are strong carriers of this subjective form, although with different emphasis on its different aspects. Samira, Mahin, Maryam, Shahnaz, and Pooran belong to the middle class, while Zahra, Fatima, Ozra and Roghieh come from working class families. Although all ten women are culturally traditional, the difference in their social class influences the way they deal with both traditions and modernity.

Zahra, forty five years old, is a religious working class woman who is high school graduate and works as a school cleaner. Having lost her husband at a young age, she has raised her children by herself. Zaynab is sixty one years old and has a secondary school education. She did not have a job or participate in public events in the past because of her husband’s abusive and violent behaviour and she was not allowed to leave the house. She started working and as a street seller eleven years ago after her husband was hospitalised in a mental clinic. Fatima, Ozra and Roghieh, are housewives and have more than two children. Fatima is forty years old and has a secondary school education. Her husband is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War with a permanent mental condition as a result of the War. Ozra is thirty two years old and has a primary school education. Both Fatima and Ozra were born in small remote towns where no high school education was provided for them and as a result they left school at a young age and got married. Roghieh is thirty years old and

illiterate and when she was asked about the level of her education she did not know what 'education' meant.

Samira, twenty eight years old, is a relatively religious, working-class woman. Working in the office of a local magazine as an administration assistant, she is struggling to make enough money to live on. Mahin, sixty five years old, is a religious, middle-class woman. She is an active member of a charity that provides deprived single mothers with training and financial help. Having an active social life and being in touch with different people through her wide social network, she regularly contributes to different social events at her local neighbourhood and attends religious ceremonies in a local mosque where she mixes with other religious women (and men) every day. Maryam is forty five years old, married, educated, middle-class and religious. She is a counsellor in an all-girl high school<sup>19</sup> where she provides counselling and mental health support for students.

Shahnaz, seventy four years old and married, is a secular middle class and educated woman and a well-known women's rights scholar. Shahnaz is driven by traditionalist subjectivities: she defends women's traditional status in families, has a strong nationalist tendency and the belief in the superiority of women to men in the ancient Iranian culture, and moreover, she believes in hierarchy in society where the ruling class should consist of the people from the educated and/or noble families. As will be explained in the section on emancipatory subjectivity, Shahnaz is also driven by elements of emancipatory elements: she has written, translated and published several books on women's issues and gender roles in Iran, has been involved in activities to seek women's rights, and has spent some time in prison for her activities.

Pooran is a religious middle-class and educated women's rights activist in her late fifties. Although she is Azam's friend and despite their similarities (for instance, both were active participants of the Islamic Revolution) and the fact that they collaborate in some projects, however, for reasons that will become clear later on, Pooran is not considered to be a carrier of what I have categorised as Islamist subjectivity. One main difference between these two women is that Pooran criticises the current government for neglecting women's problems and seeks changes in laws in favour of women, whereas Azam – being active in women-related media activities – is not critical of the regime and does not talk about any changes. Pooran's internal disposition is remarkable in

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<sup>19</sup> Schools in Iran are segregated by gender.

different respects and, as it will be explained later on, some of these aspects are in tension with, and even contradict one another. A detailed analysis of her inner dispositions and their comparisons with some other interviewees of this research will be carried out in the next section.

As was said above, central to the traditionalist subjectivities is a strong tendency to maintain the legacy of the past (particularly Islamic or Iranian culture) and the status quo in a way that, for instance, one adheres to religious practices or conforms to the traditional values of Iranian society. These tendencies form core components of the individual's conduct of life and lifestyle. In contrast to the subjectivity of the desire for the West that creates in women a desire to change themselves based on the latest technology, fashion and lifestyle, the traditionalist subjectivities involve a tendency to keep the old fashioned values and principles. For the more religious women these principles are mostly based on their religious beliefs whereas for others (Shahnaz for instance) criteria such as morality and ethics are the basis for their judgements.

Shahnaz defines people's social status on the basis of their noble lineage or roots. It is thus clear that people are not equal at all for her, and some people are superior based on their lineage. She is against the way capitalism has changed social relations in Iran, which has led to the emergence of an Iranian bourgeoisie. For Shahnaz, therefore, a sudden increase in an individual's power, work position or money cannot improve his or her social prestige. She supports the idea that there are social hierarchies which should be respected. She is also against the rise of post-revolutionary religious elites. She, for instance, expresses her irritation towards those Islamist women who, coming from working class families in 'small villages', have had a sudden change in their social class as a result of being supporters of the regime. This also shows indeed her rejection of 'parvenus' (new rich, or new elite):

I am fixed in my own position and have always belonged to the same social class but [after the Revolution] we have had a jump in social class [for some people] here. Someone who is coming from a remote village [and from a working-class family], for instance, might have suddenly found their way to the current ruling system. You hear some of authorities that used to be, for instance, shepherders [before the Islamic Revolution] now are the leaders of [governmental] organisations.

Men and women are not equal for Shahnaz. Throughout the interview, not only did she highlight what she refers to as 'Iranian feminine identity' but she also highlighted in admiration the ancient power that she believes Iranian women had for generations (and is an idea deeply

internalised and even crystallised in her inner being). Unlike many feminist scholars who write about gender equality, Shahnaz, who calls herself a “fighter”, has been trying to spread this idea of traditional supremacy of Iranian women to the other women:

This land, particularly this region (Iran), has been the land of the Goddesses and there is a competitive fight between women’s power and men’s power. That’s why in some villages in Iran, especially those in north of Iran, women are secretly bosses [...]. If the grandmother does not agree, no marriages would happen.

This emphasis on women’s ‘feminine but powerful’ influence is high in Shahnaz as she enjoys discussing the influential female members of her family. Being born in a family with powerful and educated women, she admits that her concerns toward women’s issues, her interest in writing and her initial bonds with the society and the people outside her home was strongly influenced by her mother. Shahnaz argues that she has inherited the *feminine power* from her female ancestors particularly her mother who was the “boss” in her family:

The situation in our home was unique because later when I started going outside home, I realised nowhere was like that and no woman had experienced the feminine power as much as we had... all of them [women of my family] were the main decision makers in their families [...]. Within our family, relatives nicknamed my mother ‘Churchill’ as she would always make wise decisions.

Mahin, on the other hand, is strongly religious and admires both religious traditions (particularly those related to family and men and women’s relationship) and the Islamic Revolution in Iran which she believes took place on the account of religious values – she sees the Revolution as a religious rather than a political movement. Two aspects of religious traditions that she particularly highlights are hijab and women’s modesty. During her interview, she admitted several times that women’s (and not men’s) chastity keeps the foundations of families strong and women with heavy make-up and tight clothes are ‘voluntarily’ exposing themselves to street harassment. These men (who can be other women’s husbands), Mahin argued, look at the women who offer their sexuality and have sexual desire for them: “not only in Iran but also in other countries, the reason of women being raped or assaulted in public places is women’s provocative behaviour”. This emphasis on women’s hijab according to Mahin is not only a direct Islamic order but also a part of Iranian ancient culture. In other words, Mahin’s deep traditionalism goes as far as believing that religious traditions, and particularly hijab and chastity, gain their legitimacy through a restoration of ancient customs and morals.

If you look at the ancient inscriptions you will see that the Iranians have never been dishonourable or immoral. If you look at the ancient inscriptions [you will see that] women have hijab. If you go to villages in Yazd where the Zoroastrians live, you will see that women wear a sort of head scarf. Even Mary has hijab in her pictures which shows hijab is an order by all religions.

Of the remaining women, Samira, Maryam, Zahra, Zaynab, Fatima, Ozra and Roghieh are religious and in favour of religious traditions. Zahra is against the aspects of Western culture (those that influence society through satellite channels or the Iranian women who come from Western countries) that have promoted unveiling among women. Samira is a young woman but unlike the other young participants of this research is in favour of Islamic hijab and modesty and sees it a part of the society's traditions. For Samira the behaviour and appearance of a woman should be in line with the common conventions of Iranian society:

We have in our society some social mores. There are some unusual hairstyles or outfits that make everybody on streets look at you [...]. Uncommon appearances or makeups are increasing nowadays. I think makeup is not bad by itself but if somebody does a heavy makeup that is more suitable for evening parties than walking on streets, it is not good. Our people don't like such a thing.

Zaynab's subjective determination is almost totally driven by her religious ideas. During her interview she refers to "what Islam says" several times as a reference for the decisions women should take in their lives. Just like Mahin and Samira she stresses hijab and women's modesty as the most important means to keep the society safe:

I totally disagree that a woman putting on makeup before going outside. Why? Because one should not make herself like a doll and show herself to the people outside her home. Even a light make up [...]. Islam says don't make yourself a doll when you go outside. Try to do it at home. Put on makeup for your husband. Wear attractive clothes for your husband. [...] That's why they say a woman should look simple in society and outside her home but she can do whatever she wants at her home.

The other fundamental aspect of the traditionalist subjectivities which was mentioned above is the tendency to help the poor and those in need on one hand and avoid immorality and sins on the other hand. This doing what is 'good' (and eluding what is 'bad'), which is based on religion, has more to do with an affirmation of one's religious identity than with any desire to increase equality. For instance, one may help others mainly on the basis of what the Quran and religious books emphasise and thus simultaneously as a way of becoming a virtuous Muslim (according to the divine punishment and reward system). Similarly, one may avoid sinning to

evade the potential divine punishment. In some women this desire for benevolence is so strong that forms a fundamental part of their everyday life. It might result in a constant self-assessment in some women so that they continually compare and adjust their thoughts and deeds to what they are ought to do according to Islamic values. It might also become an ethical force for self-improvement or create a strong inner disposition or conviction in individuals for growth, change and development inspired by religion and traditions. Mahin admits that she lives her everyday life with a sort of “self-awareness”:

I’m trying to reach an inner honesty in myself [...]. I believe a person, who has faith in God and knows that she would leave this world one day, should keep that part of her soul pure and for that honesty is a must. Whatever I do [in life], I compare it with this ideological model.

In some women the adherence to religious rituals may become a source of power, strength and resilience towards their problems. For Zahra religion functions as a comforter of her pains and at the same time a protector when she encounters problems as she says: “every time I am upset, I do prayers. I sit in the back yard under the rain and say my prayers. It seems it gives me power”. Maryam’s approach in confronting similar problems is also strongly influenced by her religious beliefs. She deals with her issues by deploying an attitude of patience and trying to gain inner strength from a strong belief in God:

When a problem occurs in family, I firstly try to manage my stress and try to control my agitation. [...] I don’t show any negative reaction and I don’t blame the other person quickly [...] and I speak with God for help.

Mahin uses religion as a controlling device and even as an excuse to resolve what she thinks are her personality flaws. Religiosity seems to give her a motive to be a ‘better, more complete person’. When she sees an unfavourable characteristic in herself or the need to change it, her faith gives her an excuse to do so. She desires to be a ‘good’ person because she believes in God. She is honest enough to talk about her flaws:

There were times that I realised I could not control myself. For instance, when I did something good for the others, I used to exaggerate it a little bit. [To get rid of this bad habit], I realised that I should try to do more prayers. And that praying helped me control my words in a considerable way.



As was mentioned before women's social class influences and shapes the way they approach the traditions. Those who are middle-class and have greater level of social interactions are more likely to be confident and dominant in their interactions with men inside and outside the private realm. Shahnaz and Mahin are two examples of such women who both believe in superiority of women (to men). Shahnaz believes that "if a husband does not behave well, the woman should kick him out of the house". In a similar way, Mahin is satisfied with her "inner power" and what she calls a "manly attribute". Although she believes women are generally "support seekers" – an attribute that she tries to avoid – and men are "supporters", she does not need a man's help in dealing with her issues:

I even sometimes help men when they are in trouble. Once I helped a guy whose mobile was stolen from him by force. I never feel that I have any difference with men. I never needed anybody to support me.

Another approach among the middle class participants of this research, Mahin, Shahnaz and Maryam is that they are more aware of concepts such as women's rights and feminism, even if they all reject feminism. This opposition to feminism is different from the opposition present in an Islamist subjectivity, as the latter is more an affirmation of the state's anti-West propaganda. Some women reject feminism from a religious point of view and argue that since in Islam men and women are not equal, feminism is totally unacceptable. Maryam, for instance, is critical of feminism although from a religious perspective. For her, feminists believe in gender equality whereas according to Islam men and women cannot be equal:

I don't involve myself in stuff like feminism and have never done much reading about it although our library in school had books about women and feminism. The reason is that, I have a religious view. I don't see any reason why men and women should be equal. That is correct that they are both humans but according to our religion, there is no equality [between men and women].

Other women support the traditional roles of women in families and blame feminists for insisting on 'being a man' or attributing women with tasks that are 'manly' and hard to do. In speaking about women's rights activism in Iran, Mahin rejects feminism arguing that women's rights should not be separated from men's rights. For her, therefore, women's rights are as important as men's rights and none of them should be prioritised. Although she approves of the recent changes in some laws in favour of women (law of inheritance for instance), she criticises

feminists for damaging women's traditional status within their families and the society which as a result no support is left for women:

They (feminists) separate a woman from her family and society, [to become] an isolated creature that [having no support] has to rely on herself [for all her everyday tasks] [...]. My daughter told me that in Sweden, for instance, a woman has to lift heavy things without a help though a woman's body is not designed for doing such hard things. These feminist games make women lonely and damaged [...]. A man who provides for his family needs support too. If we focus too much on women, men's status will deteriorate.

There are also some women who refuse to agree to feminism as they see it as Western, foreign to Iranian culture and incompatible to 'local' principles. For instance, Shahnaz, despite being one of the pioneers of women's rights movement in Iran, does not call herself a feminist. She believes that women in Iran, although need to know about the experiences of the Western women in fighting for their rights, do not need Western models such as feminism. She rejects feminism as she believes it cannot be fitted into Iranian society and if women want to improve their status they must find the power they have traditionally had. This power, Shahnaz argues, is purely feminine and the women who appreciate it can have a control over their lives without a need to act like men:

We must fight on the basis of our culture [instead on relying on what comes from abroad] [...] .We need to know our culture [...]. My mother was an Iranian woman, she wouldn't imitate Western women's lifestyle. She was an Iranian woman who believed in women's power [...]. She did not know what feminism was [...]. She was totally Iranian, she would not wear trousers or suit, she wouldn't smoke, she wouldn't do anything that men do, she was incredibly feminine, but you could be [feminine and at the same time ] powerful [too].

Shiva is one of participants of this research whose relationship with her mother reflects an interesting contrast between feminism and this aspect of the traditionalist subjectivities. Shiva, as will be discussed later on, is a feminist who believes in gender equality. While she describes her male co-workers (or the men she is in touch with) by genderless terms such as 'colleagues' and 'humans' and does not consider people's genders in her interactions, Shiva's mother does not believe in gender equality. She, for instance, expects her male colleagues to open the door for women, let them enter the room first and does not tell 'dirty' jokes in women's presence.

In contrast to Shahnaz and Mahin, women from working-class families, where traditional values are highly underlined, as well as those with less education or lower jobs are more likely to

accept patriarchy, be 'obedient' wives and 'good' mothers and prioritise their families' interests over their own. Zahra is a notable example of this who despite devoting her life to rearing her children, still carries the feelings of guilt and shame as she thinks she has not been a 'good' mother to her children. She has been raised in a family whose father had absolute power and neither her mother nor the female children were allowed to exit the home without his permission. Interestingly enough, even though her father has passed away, she still sees herself obliged to the same rules: working in an all-women environment, avoiding unnecessary interchanges with men in public places and covering herself with black chador outside her house to be protected from strange men:

My father is not here anymore. When I go to a place where men are present I feel uncomfortable. I was offered a job in an office, I knew their clients are mostly men so I said no! [...] Although I lost my husband fifteen years ago while I was still young, nobody has ever talked behind my back in an inappropriate way or I never had any problems. [...] or the unnecessary talks. Sometimes the taxi driver talks too much but I don't answer at all.

Zahra does not know what feminism is but she believes that if women (especially those with less education) are given too much freedom they may take advantage of it:

Some women take advantage of their rights, in divorce for example. A woman for example gets married with a high dowry. Then she forces her husband through legal procedures to pay the dowry to her and then she asks for a divorce. She says 'this is my right, this is my money'. This is mistreating the rights. I know a woman who has done this several times to buy herself a house.

Although Maryam has a university education and is middle class she was born to a religious working class family. She defends the traditional (Islamic) ideas about women whose roles are defined within the domestic realm and in relation to their male relatives. For instance, she admits that she would not work outside her home without her husband's permission or that she wishes she had enough time to develop her cooking and housekeeping skills in order to be a better wife for her husband:

I think this [my husband's satisfaction] somehow gives me peace of mind [...]. We are being raised according to the idea that a man must give permission to his wife [...]. This permission gives you peace of mind as your husband is happy with what you are doing.

Maryam's views towards family roles for Muslim women has been partly shaped under the influence of her mother and old sister who similarly (and even to a greater extent) believed that a

woman needs her husband's permission to exit the home and do her daily chores. Maryam's mother stopped going to a local mosque due to her husband's disapproval. Maryam's sister, being a passionate participant in the Revolution at a young age, neither went to university nor did she go to work after marriage as her husband did not allow her to.

Ozra's opinions on hijab, make up and women's modesty are based on a combination of old patriarchal values that wanted women to be hidden from men as well as Islamic values. A man, as Ozra describes him, is the "head of the household" and a woman should ask his opinion even for the smallest matters. For example, although her husband beats her sometimes, she does not entertain the idea of leaving or breaking the marriage:

Men and women are supposed to be different. In a house you are living, a man is the head of the household. For whatever you do, even when you want to drink a glass of water, you should ask his opinion. When you go to family courts nowadays if a man slaps his wife in her face the court could take the woman's right.

There are, however, other aspects to Ozra's subjective determinations. Although Ozra has accepted the patriarchal roles in her personal life, she wants different rules for her daughter. In other words, she is herself very traditional, but does not believe this traditionalism suits her daughter. She is aware of the changes that modernity has brought about and that society has changed as a result thereof. Women like men in the modern world, Ozra argues, have rights in society and need to leave the household to engage in their everyday lives. She, however, does not seem to want the modern roles for herself and instead, she has invested all her hopes on her daughter. Ozra has never had a chance to finish high school as the schools were far from the small town in which she lived. That is why she wants her only daughter to study and have a job in the future:

It is very good that she (my daughter) can have her own income. When she wants to buy something she won't have to ask her husband, I want her to have her own income and buy it herself. It is because I did not do it myself.

She wants her daughter to find her own way although she does not want this path for herself. While she sees her personal life in a pre-modern context, she wants her daughter to live according to modern times. She spends considerable time and effort on her daughter and once when she needs money for additional outside the school courses, she sold her earrings to provide the money. She

wants to provide her daughter with a better environment than what she had and as a result she does not want anything harm her marriage:

If a woman really wants to keep her marriage, she should tolerate whatever her husband does [...]. It has happened several times that my husband has beaten me. For the smallest things he has slapped me in my face. I don't object or say anything to him [in a serious way]. I [only] say you don't have the right to beat me.

In a similar way to the other women Roghieh is strongly driven by traditional values although the desire for education and work that she could not achieve herself is also strong in her. Unlike many women who wear hijab because their families push them to do so, Roghieh admits that the reason why she wears hijab is not because her husband has asked her to do so. She believes hijab adds values to a woman and keeps her safe and:

Hijab is very good, very good [...]. I wear chador sometimes. Now the weather is hot and I'm not wearing chador. But I don't let anybody see my hair or my body when I'm going out. I wear socks. When I'm out I don't like to wear tight trousers that reveals my body [...]. It gives me power. I don't like to go out with a loose hijab so that other people talk about me and say she is a bad woman.

Although Roghieh is illiterate she seems to be somehow more modern than Zaynab, Maryam and Ozra. Hijab seems to be a matter of practicality for her rather than a religious or traditional symbol. She does not seem to have the burden of religion or tradition on her shoulders. There is no religious for what she is doing as she has had no religious education. She covers her body as a matter of convenience than a religious order. Roghieh's husband, a construction worker is similarly more liberal than Zaynab, Fatima and Ozra's husbands. Roghieh describes him as a "very good man" who let his wife live her life without constantly monitoring her or being violent towards her: "everything is in my hands [at home]. He gives me money and says buy whatever you want for the house". She is illiterate herself but she is very fond of women's education and work. She wants her daughters to be educated and find jobs because she thinks they should have their own income instead of asking their husbands for money: "she should have a job before getting married. Working is good!"

These aspects of the traditionalist subjectivities that have been discussed so far (i.e. following the traditional values and tendency to self-awareness, inner-strength and compassion towards the others inspired by tradition and mainly religious values) are in quite a radical contrast

with that feature of the subjectivity of desire for the West which drives women to pursue a more successful life and focus on their personal accomplishments. There is a very strong opposition between these two subjective forms, for while the subjectivity of desire for the West creates in women a desire for individualism and a rejection of all forms of tradition which limit their individual freedom, the traditionalist subjectivities emphasise the traditional bonds between people of the same religion, culture and nationality through acts of kindness and solicitude or by avoiding immorality.

The differences between Zahra and her daughter reflects the opposition of these two subjectivities in an apt way. This desire for the West is much stronger in the daughter. Zahra, herself, seeks an improvement in her life through learning new technical skills on one hand and strengthening her religious faith on the other hand. These two desires (being more knowledgeable and a better Muslim) exist in her simultaneously as she is very well aware of both of them: for the work or knowledge-related issues, she seeks advice from the teachers (at the school where she works) while for her religious matters or questions about moralities, she chooses women who run local religious meetings. In contrast, her thirty year old daughter seeks a change in her social class because she is dissatisfied with her current situation. She, for instance, imitates fashionable looks and the lifestyle of the middle-class women, an approach that Zahra disagrees with. Shahnaz and her daughter, similarly, reflect the opposition of these two approaches. Although Shahnaz has spent most of her life on activities related to women's issues, her daughter, a successful company manager who lives in the United States, has no concerns for women's issues:

Her character is completely different from mine. Firstly, she is not concerned about women's issues, maybe because most of her life and education has been spent abroad so she has not faced any issues. However, the reason she is successful in her job is that she deals with her work problems with a sort of wisdom. She has never had to fight [as much as I had to] but she always wanted a [personal] development so she has gained success at an early age.

Zaynab's religiously oriented tendencies are strongly opposed to the subjectivity of the desire for the West. A woman in Zaynab's idea is a dependent entity who should rely on men (her father or her husband) for her decisions: "before getting married a woman's guardianship is with her family and after she is married it is with her husband". While for Sarah (our middle class participant), individual success is of a great importance to the extent that she might leave her husband if he is against her activities, for Zaynab patriarchal rules and the roles they give to a

woman within a family are more important than a woman's individual success. Zaynab's insistence on a woman's traditional role in a family is against capitalist modernity as she does not mean to make money "just any way". She believes a woman can only have a job when they follow Islamic instructions and considers her "family values". Pointing at a woman who was begging for money near where the interview was performed, she added that although begging is an easier way of making money she would never do that:

A woman can make decisions, even for herself, only to the degree that she does not damage the reputation of her family [...]. I'm working here as an honourable person. I don't beg for money. This [beggar] woman who just came nearby, another woman just gave her money. When I can work here for myself I won't beg people for money.

Zaynab wants the same values for her daughter as she forced her to accept only certain types of jobs. Although Zaynab believes women should study and work and have some saving of their own, she thinks that her daughter could only work for public organisations (governmental employments) where Islamic codes exist and not for private companies. She is against what she sees as working in an immoral context where women are mixing with men:

My daughter wanted to work but I didn't let her work just anywhere. She for example told me that a mobile network company would accept her to work for them I said to her 'no, most companies are not safe for a decent honourable girl to work. We have learned from our mothers that these companies are not good places that I let you go there to work'.

Maryam and Mahin also echo interesting differences from the other middle class women interviewees such as Soori, Mona, Sarah and Biti. Although Maryam is enthusiastic about her job in a similar way to these women, she is more comfortable and satisfied with her current status at work so that she is not overly ambitious to upgrade it. She argues that the mental health services that she provides for students is mostly for the sake of helping them without her wishing to achieve a better position at work. Unlike these four women, the sort of growth that Maryam seeks in her life is not a better financial status or a higher employment position. Rather, what Maryam strives for has to do with gaining a higher level of understanding; she has interest in learning more and, in doing so, she helps the other, or so she expects, to grow too.

As might be expected, this desire to increase her awareness and knowledge is shaped by her religious and traditional insights. In other words, the knowledge she is seeking 'must' be in line with her religious views and traditional approaches. She admits, for instance, that despite

books on feminism being available in the library where she works and even though Maryam is a reader, she is not interested in reading about feminism. Mahin also strives to be a “better person”. She is, first of all, active in charity activities to help the others and secondly, she is aware of how her thoughts can affect her actions and vice versa. She is honest enough to see her intentions:

I generally live with a sort of self-consciousness. I try to match what I say and do (my actions) with what I think and feel. I mean I try to achieve an internal integrity (honesty). For whoever believes in God, honesty and sincerity is necessary.

The traditionalist subjectivities, on the other hand, differ from the Islamist subjectivity in a number of different ways. While the Islamist subjectivity creates in women a craving for power and an involvement in power politics, religion for those who are driven by the subjectivity of desire for security and solace is a means by which they seek to control their other desires in a conscious way. For instance, for many women like Mahin, Maryam, Zahra and Samira, hijab is a way of maintaining their purity and a means of closeness to God. Zahra argues that “hijab is like my weapon as when I go out, nobody (other men) looks at me (in an inappropriate way)”. Samira similarly argues that “if I wear a loose hijab, I might be looked at as a [sexual] object. Hijab is something that I can protect myself with”. For Azam, on the other hand wearing chador (although might also encompasses the purpose of morality and closeness to God) is rather a confirmation of her compliance with the state’s ideological structure.

Shahnaz’s antagonism to Islamist women is rather noticeable as she manifests her resentment in a strong way. As a woman whose options, access to physical resources and even freedom has been restricted by the state, she does not hide her anger towards the women who, as she argues, have gained political power by surrendering to the structure of power: “money is in their hands. I cannot do such things. Women, who use ‘chador’ as a safe way, have wealth [...]. They run religious sessions and are given benefits for doing all of these”.

Zaynab’s subjective tendencies are in opposition to Islamist women who seek power by supporting the Islamic regime in Iran. Her idea of a woman is in opposition to Azam’s definition of a Muslim revolutionary woman. A woman in such a context is always ready to support the Islamic regime and such a support does not necessarily need her husband’s permission. The participation in the Revolution has particularly formed the core and the essence of such an identity.



For Zaynab, on the other hand, a woman's compliance with her husband is more important than participation in any political movement, even if the latter is led by a religious leader. As much as Zaynab is consistent in following Islamic instructions, she is not willing to defend Islam in public places. She instead leaves it to men to fight for Islam: "I personally did not participate in demonstrations because I did not want to go among men". She criticises the Islamist women who participated in demonstrations at the time of the Revolution without the permission of their fathers: "they should have first had their husbands' permission, they should have had their families' permission, their fathers' permission". While for women like Azam, Badri and Pooran the victory of the Islamic Revolution was a turning point in women's status and gave women a voice, for Zaynab it did not change women's situation. For Zaynab the most important factor in a woman's life adherence to the Islamic values. She argues that the Revolution has not changed her (or other women's) situation as for "whoever follows Islam, does her prayer and wears hijab" the Revolution does not make a change.

The relationship with God for Zaynab seems to be more important than the fact of being under an Islamic leadership. She believes in a quietist version of Islam compared to Azam who has chosen to be an activist Islamist. Being ruled by an Islamic state is of a lesser importance for her as long as the state does not force her to be 'un-Islamic'. She, in other words, believes in a more individual relationship with God than what the state offers. Since it is following the Islamic instructions that matters for her the most, being an activist Islamist (the way Azam and Badri are) can be an act against Islam. Thus for her the Islamist women are picking and choosing a version of Islam that they want and by doing this they are disobeying what she considers as God's rules.

Zaynab's subjective determinations are also opposed to any emancipatory aspects or tendencies as she does not see men and women as equals. Zaynab does not know about feminism but when she is told that there are women who fight for women's rights and try to change the laws in favour of women, she disagrees with what they do and argues that "we should listen to what Islam says". To make a decision she would firstly want to know what Islam says about that particular situation and how it will rule her life. She is satisfied with women's status in society as she believes that women have enough freedom to choose to work between public and private companies.

Fatima, in a similar way to Zaynab believes in living based on religious values. She regularly refers to the Quran and Islam as the guide for women to know how to live. In other words, women according to Fatima should decide what to do based on “what God says” as God and Quran who decide what women should do. While Zaynab’s way of life is based on what she has been taught from Islam, Fatima sometimes has her own explanations of what Islam says and thus makes her own rules. For Zaynab life as a woman is mostly about following Islamic teachings whereas Fatima has a less restrictive interpretation of Islam according to which there is the possibility of growth for women under the instructions of Islam.

Fatima believes that women, just like men, have the right to vote or to go to demonstrations to defend their country. She also believes men and women should similarly have the right to work and study. For her the possibilities for women’s growth are conditional upon following what God asks them to do. She finds education an important factor that increases people’s awareness, helps them grow and improve their social class. Fatima believes that open-minded and educated men respect their wives. She thus seems to have accepted inequality as a fact for the poor and the less educated. As a result, her “only goal in life” is that her children go to university and become “successful” people:

Everyone (men and women) could grow depending on the amount of their effort, perseverance and their faith, they could study and reach the maximum level of growth. Someone who is coming from village can grow and become a professor, a manager, a leader, a president.

Fatima sees the Iranian version of Islam more liberating for women than what exists in Saudi Arabia: “in Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to drive but in Iran they can. Why shouldn’t you learn to drive if you are allowed to?” She does not necessarily understand the different contexts of Islam but she trusts the Islam under leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei as the right version of Islam.

This section has reviewed three main aspects of the traditionalist subjectivities. At the heart of these subjectivities is a strong desire to adhere to different forms of tradition (either religious or nationalist tendencies, or both) and to live one’s life on the basis of what is considered as moral mores and standards. In middle-class women, the traditionalist subjectivities might create a strong tendency to participate in charitable works whereas women from working class families who are

carriers of these traditionalist subjectivities tend to strictly stick to the patriarchal rules. This strong sense of following and providing support to the traditions is clearly present in ten participants of this research; it distinguishes them clearly from the women discussed in previous sections. Islamist participants of this research have in common with these ten women their strong religious tendencies. These Islamist women, however, tend to support the state through their participation in political arenas through which they received access to power and financial resources whereas the ten carriers of a traditionalist subjectivity give priority to the traditional role of women in a family.

This favouring of traditional family roles, on the other hand, differentiates these women clearly from the young middle-class women of the previous section who prioritised their personal success in relation to family values. Finally, there is also a clear-cut difference between the carriers of traditionalist subjectivities and the women's rights activists. Among these ten women, those from middle-class families know about feminism and reject it as they don't see it as relevant or positive in women's lives. Working-class women, on the other hand, do not use the language of feminism or gender equality, and this is clearly not relevant to their concerns; they have accepted the fact that men are the breadwinners and the main decision makers in a family.

### **Emancipatory elements and tendencies pointing towards an emancipatory subjectivity**

Emancipatory subjectivity is a rather complex subjective configuration in which emancipatory elements and tendencies have a strong, but not an exclusive, bearing. A number of the women interviewed for this study, six of them to be precise, showed clear signs of being powerfully pulled by different elements of an emancipatory subjectivity. While it would be difficult to argue that all these women are driven by a full-fledged emancipatory subjectivity, the interviews provide unmistakable evidence that these women are, to different extents, carriers of convictions, above all on equality. These convictions are indisputably emancipatory – convictions which, to different extents and in diverse ways, are sometimes put into practice in social life in the form of political action and activism. Indeed, tensions and inner conflicts are as characteristic of these women's subjective dispositions as are the emancipatory aspects.

The purpose of this section is to provide an in-depth description and analysis of this complex subjective configuration. To do so it will explore the different ways in which these six

women deal with their emancipatory convictions about equality, including gender equality, and the inner and outer conflicts that such convictions pose to them in a society. It will attempt to show how it is particularly difficult to firstly, maintain those convictions without being discouraged and secondly, to deploy them by way of different forms of action and activism. The current section begins by examining the six women's views towards equality in general and gender equality in particular. It will also be shown that among the six interviewed women some might not stay consistent with their convictions about 'gender equality' in their everyday lives.

The current section will then deal with the strength of the emancipatory convictions in these six participants and the extent to which such convictions are manifested in action. It will also be shown that the conviction for equality might become rather strong in some women in the sense that they may strive for equality and by doing so they actually take major risks including the risk of spending time in prison. The third part of the section is concerned with the two levels at which the struggles for gender equality in Iran have been taking place: first, seeking a structural change or a change in the discriminatory laws and policies through more or less direct confrontations with the state, and second, approaches to make indirect changes in society.

The final part of this section will look at the opposition between the emancipatory elements and other subjective determinations. By promoting equality, the desire for emancipation is against the egoistic individualism, consumerism and the thirst for personal success that the subjectivity of desire for the West propels in women. It is also on one hand against identitarian forms and the traditional values that the traditional subjectivities strengthen in women and on the other hand, is in opposition to the Islamist subjectivity that drives people to seek power by the means of religion.

Among the participants of this research Molood, Mahtab, Nazanin, Foroogh, Golnar, and Shiva manifested clear signs of being carriers of emancipatory tendencies. A very relevant characteristic concerning these women to be emphasised here is that they all belong to what we may call the 'intellectual classes': all of them have pursued higher education studies, and four of them are women's rights activists. Molood is fifty years old, middle-class and educated. In several academic studies she is referred to as a pro-Islamic feminist and one of the pioneers of women's rights movement in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. She has spent some time in prison for women's rights activities that she undertook outside Iran. Mahtab is likewise thirty years old, middle-class and educated; however, she is a "leftist feminist" (or so she considers herself) who

has participated in different women's rights activities (campaigns, gatherings, meetings etc.) and writes about gender issues for various women's magazines including the magazine that Molood works in. Mahtab refers to Molood and Shahnaz as "inspirational women".

Shahnaz, as was explained in the previous section, is pulled by different subjective determinations. Despite being driven by strong traditionalist subjectivities, she is an author and writes and translates books about women's rights in Iran. During the presidential elections in 2009, she also organised a series of meetings in her office with other women, mainly from intellectual classes, to discuss women's demands to the presidential candidates.

Being a publisher who strongly criticises the state's gender policies and the mandatory hijab, she has been in what she calls a "constant fight with the Ministry of Culture in Iran" against book censorship and in order to receive official approval to publish her books. This conflict continued to the extent that she even had to spend some time in jail for an anti-censorship speech she had delivered in the past. She sees book censorship as an illegal act rather than an act against the human freedom and liberation: "the Ministry of Culture audits the books against the law. This shouldn't happen according to our laws".

These elements of desire for liberation go together with a rejection of what is considered Western. The emancipatory aspects that emerge in Shahnaz's fight with the state appear to be anchored in tradition and thus is not a typical case of emancipatory modernity. She fights against the obstacles she finds because she believes women of her family are traditionally "fighters". Shahnaz is not religious but she is not against religion as such; instead she is against using religion as a means to achieve power. She, for instance, does not reject hijab, but is against imposing hijab on women. Her reason for opposing compulsory hijab also lies in her desire to return to traditional morality rather than in any support of equality: instead of covering women's bodies to diminish men's offensive attitudes, it is men, Shahnaz argued, who should be honourable and avoid staring at women's bodies.

Nazanin is educated, middle class and in her late thirties. She is a part of an emerging wave of professional women in their thirties who are single, have good jobs and all in all enjoy a successful professional career. She is an independent women's rights activist, which means that she does not make any references to either Islamist women or feminists; nor does she support any

particular political groups (Reformists, conservatives etc.). She works for an international development project and also does voluntary activities in relation to women's empowerment. Foroogh is forty-five years old, educated, and although coming from a working-class family, she currently belongs to the middle-class strata. Being a high school teacher, she has concerns about women's rights and gender equality in Iran. Golnar, thirty-four years old, is middle-class, educated and secular; she works as a journalist in a prominent secular newspaper. Although she is not a women's rights activist and she does not consider herself a feminist, in the past she has participated in the gatherings to object to restrictions on women's presence in the sports stadiums.

Shiva is thirty years old, educated and middle-class. She is a feminist and a women's rights activist with a great enthusiasm for writing and doing research on concepts such as feminism which she believes are still new to Iranian society. Shiva's difference with all other participants of this research is her good understanding and capacity for analysis, which, together with her deep knowledge on the current and historical socio-political issues, make her capable of examining causes, actors and the dynamics of current social and political conflicts.

As stated in the title of this section, these women have been found to be carriers of different aspects and tendencies which are, to different extents but unambiguously, emancipatory. The main reason for that is their conviction about equality, a conviction which sometimes goes beyond the idea of gender equality or equality between women and men, towards the essential equality of all human beings – a conviction which probably makes them more sensitive to the actual status of women as subordinated beings in most realms of social life. This does not necessarily mean that these women are driven by, so to say, a full-fledged emancipatory subjectivity, nor does it mean that they are all the time determined in a consistent fashion to stand up for equality in their everyday lives. In actual social life there may often be compromises and adaptations to the current state of things. Action and conduct, likewise, may not always be consistent with such conviction.

Drawing on one of the crucial ideas of Rancière's account of emancipation as "the denial of an identity given by an order or given by the ruling system of policy" (1992, p.62), it can be argued here that the aforementioned emancipatory aspects and tendencies involve, on one hand, a desire to look beyond the boundaries set by Islamism, capitalism, nationalism, etc., and, on the other hand, actual participation in a variety of initiatives and actions aimed to promote equality in society. Unlike the traditionalist subjectivities which encourage women to emphasise their

feminine identity (in opposition to the masculine power), and in strong opposition to the Islamist subjectivity which is concerned with one's Islamic identity, any emancipatory aspect is about accepting with all the consequences the idea of all men and women as *human counterparts* without any of them being superior to another.

There are a number of questions that can help us detect and examine the presence of emancipatory elements in the six participants: do they deny divisions based on their gender or are they against any identitarian process that differentiate and discriminate people? What are their views and convictions about the divisions based on religion or nationalism? How do the emancipatory tendencies manifest themselves in their everyday lives? Do they treat people in equal ways? All of the six women (Molood, Mahtab, Nazanin, Foroogh, Golnar, and Shiva) believe in gender equality and all admitted that in order to change women's status in Iran, men's status should improve correspondingly as both men and women are victims of patriarchal systems. Although what was seen in them is not a full denial of Iranian or Islamic nationality, none of these women favour religious or nationalist values over universal values.

Holding the view that "men are also the victims of patriarchy", Molood criticises the women's rights movements that are biased against men, or particular men, instead of battling the patriarchy. In other words, Molood sees both men and women as equal and believes that it is the patriarchal system that should be battled against and not men:

Why 'women's studies' has changed to gender studies worldwide? Because they said men and women should be addresses equally. Even if you raise women's awareness while men are not aware and they do not accept this equality, there will be resistance against it and there will be fights between men and women.

The interview with Molood took place in her office and although male staff were present, she was not wearing a head scarf. Not only has Molood been a participant in the Islamic Revolution but she also used to be the editor in chief of a well-known state supported women's magazine. Regarding the restrictive environment of the immediate post-revolutionary Iran in which having any state positions required people's strong adherence to Islam, Molood's current lack of commitment to hijab reveals a substantial twist in her views towards religion. Molood does not fully deny religious values but firstly, she is secular enough to see religious values as "private

matters” that people are free to choose the way they choose their lifestyles. Secondly, she is against imposing religious values to women for it creates inner contradictions in them:

I don't believe much in an official or a politically accepted religion [for all people] or that all Muslims must follow similar ways for their Muslim-hood. [...]. What would happen when you impose hijab to a girl who used to wear mini skirt outside home and even her grandmother does not believe in hijab? Will she become a [better] Muslim? No! She will only feel inner-conflicts in herself because she sees things at school and then her family treat her differently [...]. Then this child will suffer from a contradiction which will damage her whole personality and when she enters the society she does not know what she wants.

For Foroogh a better situation for women in society takes place when women are seen as human beings and men and women are both treated equally regardless of their genders. She, for instance, criticises feminists as she believes they “focus too much on women” in a way that “they put women in opposition to men”. She argues that feminists not only are not seeking equality but also are occasionally against men and marriage. In terms of religious views, Foroogh seems to have a moderate attitude towards religion which is manifested in the fact that while – during the interview – she did not wear a full hijab the way Islamist women do, she does not completely deny religion or question its value.

The belief in gender equality seems to be well internalised in Nazanin. The reason seems to be the family in which she and her brother were raised in a gender neutral way, and they were both treated equally: “it was only when I entered the high school that I learned about genders as my parents had never treated us based on our genders. They raised us as human beings.” Nazanin contrasts her parents' *gender-neutral* childrearing approach with her religious teachers' *gender-biased* teaching methods that created inner-conflicts in her. She has learned from her parents that humans are equal and being a woman does not limit or change the decisions she makes for herself. That is the reason why she treats her male colleagues, friends and even strangers the same as women. By contrast, religious teachers at school, as Nazanin argues, tried to teach her and her friends about “doing and not doing certain things” only because they were women. The opposition and contradictions between these two radical different forms of education later became the basis for who she is as a social activist: “I found contradictions between what I was taught at school and the realities in society and these contradictions made me look for the reasons”.



Nazanin talks neither against nor in favour of religious or nationalist values. She might believe in certain religious or nationalist values yet she is well aware of the role of religion in the formation of people's identities and respects those women who question their religious identities:

I have a friend who is very religious, extremely religious, and you know these [religious] people do not listen to music. She told me that 'my wish [when I was younger] was that one day I would play tar (the musical instrument) but my father did not let me do it'. Now she is sending her daughter to tar class. I think these contradictions are good.

A second key aspect showing the presence of emancipatory elements lies in the extent to which these women's conduct and action are consistent with their conviction about equality, and thus how far they go in fighting against inequality, patriarchy and oppression. To put it another way, a conviction or a belief does not always lead to action or conduct consistent with that belief. For example, the belief in gender equality might not necessarily result in a belief in *equality of all human beings* nor may it manifest itself in all aspects of an individual's everyday life. A conviction for emancipation includes a broader context than gender equality. One may seek equality between men and women and yet be insensitive to other forms of inequality or treat other people in unequal ways. Indeed, some of the women we are talking about here do strive for gender equality and feminism but these tendencies may be alien to human equality, which would indicate that their struggle for gender equality is more a particularistic struggle rather than one for genuine emancipation.

Golnar works in the office of a famous newspaper where, unlike many other workplaces, the employees are allowed to hang pictures of Virginia Woolf and Karl Marx on the walls and women can stand outside the office to smoke along with their male colleagues – although women's smoking is still a taboo in Iran. For Golnar the attitude towards women at her office is different from many other work places in which men are segregated from women: "to be identified as a human being is much better than being identified on the basis of your gender". In general, therefore, it seems that Golnar acts in a consistent way with her conviction about gender equality and would like to be equality treated in other contexts or situations.

There is, however, another aspect of equality that Golnar highlights during the interview: equality under the civil rights. For Golnar these rights are not based on religion, nationality or gender divisions, but they are universal. This means that there are universal guidelines that all 'civilised' and 'cultured' people around the world abide for living in a civil society regardless of

their gender. Being a secular woman, Golnar does not commend the Sharia laws that tend to set men apart from women. Instead, she holds the view that in the society, both men and women should acknowledge equally their own rights and respect each other's rights. Her emphasis on civil rights is in fact in opposition to emancipatory elements which normally challenge the established social orders.

Reflecting a similar opinion, Shiva holds the view that "men and women suffer from inequality in a same way although women experience it more often". For Shiva people should be dealt with firstly as "citizens and then as men and women": "once in a meeting one of my male colleagues told me 'I am like your father' and I answered 'we are in a professional meeting, you are only my colleague'". Shiva's view which is the identification of people based on their citizenship and not their genders, although reveals Shiva's struggle for being free from the traditional male and female identities, may still fall into a form of division: concerning the different, often hierarchical, positions in a professional context; those who do not respect such professional hierarchies she tends to consider as 'uncivil' in that they violate other's people 'civil rights' (which she tends to mix up with professional rights or privileges).

Thus, it is important to see how the emancipatory convictions can manifest themselves at a personal level in women's everyday lives. The women who are strongly driven by this subjectivity not only believe that men and women are equal, but also cannot remain silent towards discriminations against other women. Instead of focusing on their personal life and trying to find solutions for their own issues, these women try to work together and find solutions that increase gender equality for all women. Given the fact that in Iran the ruling system heavily relies on its Islamic identity, a denial of identities (particularly the denial of religious identity) as a core feature to emancipatory subjectivity is likely to involve risks, sometimes serious. An action in favour of equality can for instance, result in one's losing money, access to higher education and jobs; it may even result in imprisonment. This desire to react and fight against inequality requires a greater level of determination that only few women among the participants of this study have.

Forough argues that if she sees a discrimination against a woman she will not be indifferent to it and instead she tries to help her as much as she can: "I felt sympathy towards any women who had a problem. I tried to put myself in her place and help her". For Molood the conviction for gender equality manifests itself in writing about women's issues in Iran and also in her struggles

against the state to publish them. For several years she has been running a women's magazine in which articles on feminism, equality, discrimination against women, domestic violence, and legal issues for women have been published. Having in mind that gender issues are of great sensitivity within the ruling system, the state has been putting bans on her magazine for several years. That is why she has to spend a significant time in courts or in negotiations with the authorities to suspend the bans. The most recent example of these struggles happened shortly after the interview with Molood when her magazine was shut down by the state for several months<sup>20</sup>.

For Mahtab, discrimination against an individual woman should be considered as a discrimination against all women and that is why she never stays passive towards it. She tries to seek help from other women (friends and other feminists) to change the issue to "a public demand for all women". Being in touch with a feminist network whose members work as a team, Mahtab relies on women's collective power to find solutions for women's issues. Mahtab calls herself a "fighter" who "has a sword in her hand" and is ready to fight whenever she sees a discrimination against a woman. Although, as was explained in the previous section, Shahnaz calls herself a fighter too, the desire for fight that Mahtab and Shahnaz have in common is propelled by different subjective forms. Shahnaz fights because she believes herself to be a fighter. She fights to defeat men as fighting for her is a manifestation of her feminine power. For instance, she battles the state (the censorship that Ministry of Culture imposes to publishers in particular) as for her the state resembles the male power. Therefore, for Shahnaz the fight against the state is more a traditional encounter of feminine and masculine powers than a quest for equality.

On the other hand, Mahtab fights against gender inequality and discrimination. Unlike Shahnaz who has been raised in a family with powerful women, Mahtab has been had to learn to defend and fight for her rights. Having experienced various social discriminations at a young age, she learned to battle the social discrimination when she started her social interactions and noticed the inequality in society: "until the age of twenty I used to stay silent in encountering a street harassment but now we are doing activist works against it". Coming from a working-class family and being exposed to prejudice against people of this social class, she is in fact against the procedures that form hierarchal divisions in societies. This initial desire to end the social

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<sup>20</sup> The restrictions the government placed on her magazine have recently been removed.

discrimination in her has eventually changed to a desire for being a feminist to fight against gender inequality:

Being marginalised made up my agency and even made me a feminist. I am leftist. This idea of making change [in society] has been greatly influenced by marginalisation.

Golnar loves sports and feels frustrated that women in Iran are not allowed to enter the sports stadiums to watch live matches. She has participated in a movement organised by activist women in objection to the ban on women's presence in stadiums in Iran and she has even written articles in a newspaper against this ban. There is certainly a main difference between Mahtab and Golnar on their approaches towards the women's rights activities. Although both women argue that women's organised activities are suppressed since the Ahmadinejad's presidency, Mahtab still tries to be a part of women's movement through changes that she has made in her strategies whereas Golnar has given up involvement in any activities as for her they are too risky. Although Golnar would like work in a less restrictive environment, but she is not willing to take further risks to defend other women's rights. While Mahtab has been fired from several jobs for objecting to gender inequality in her work places, Golnar admits that she is reluctant to object to a violation of woman's rights.

She, for instance, once witnessed an argument between two passengers of a public vehicle, a man and a woman, without trying to interfere or defend the woman who was harassed by the man. For Golnar gender discrimination can only be reduced through fundamental cultural changes in the society, increasing women's awareness and challenging patriarchy through free media and not by individual acts. While Mahtab sees activists (including herself) as "mediators between ordinary people and the state" who can make a change through trainings, for Golnar, it is the state that should take the responsibility of training people against discrimination and inequality. Golnar argues that in a country like Iran where all NGOs are suppressed, there is no free media, and nobody can openly speak about women's rights, there is little hope for a change in women's status:

You cannot talk about this issue [women's rights] in TV programs, you cannot write about it in newspapers much [...]. They don't even let you organise a conference to make housewives familiar with their rights [...]. The TV broadcasts are only showing rubbish dramas whose message is 'a good woman is the one who does not leave her house except for giving birth'. In totalitarian regimes, in closed political environments, there is not much hope to change unless through major risks. [...] I'm not the person who would take such risks.

In its more consistent way and at its peak, an emancipatory subjectivity becomes a strong conviction in women about equality that may involve *living for equality*. In other words, the desire to increase equality among people (and accomplishing a “gender neutral society” as Mahtab argues) becomes a main objective for the individual not only in that she orients her everyday life by it, but also as she considers striving for equality as part of her very existence and something which is at the basis of who she is. This living for equality requires an enormous devotion of one’s energy, time, and access to financial resources and risking their jobs and freedom.

For Mahtab, the resistance against coercive power and challenging it (whether coming from the state or the men on the streets) on one hand and the desire to change (both her and other women’s lives) on the other hand form who she is. In the approach she takes for life there is a desire to resist and challenge the structure of power, a desire to find alternative ways and solutions to overcome the barriers, a desire to be seen and to be heard and to scream, a tendency to insubordination and a desire for rebellion. She has a positive mentality combined with hope, patience and tireless effort to make changes in women’s position in society. She argues that her “internal power”, a “deep faith in humanity” and the hope that “the current status will change” are the reasons that keep the hope for living alive in her:

My friends and I who are working together believe that we should stay in Iran and work in Iran. I may leave Iran only if I am threatened with death.

The quest for gender equality which was discussed before, has taken place in Iran through two strategies: direct encounters with the structure of power and indirect strategies that result in an increase in equality in society. *Direct* strategies whose aim is putting pressure on the ruling system to change the discriminatory laws and policies are generally political acts that may include organising and participating in gatherings, campaigns, demonstrations, speeches and conferences and even writing about gender inequalities. These strategies are no longer in use ever since the state suppression of egalitarian movements in Iran during the Ahmadinejad’s presidency. One reason is that a direct encounter with the state is too costly in Iran and may result in years in jail.

Nazanin divides activities on women’s rights into political and social. Social activities are those “legal” campaigns and movements that demand more rights for women and she, as a social activist, has participated in a number of them. Political activities on the other hand are those

campaigns and gatherings that challenge the laws that are directly based on Sharia or aim to oppose the ruling system which she disapproves them. Being involved in such activities, Nazanin argues, “changes you from a ‘social activist’ to a ‘political activist’” and she prefers to be identified as the former: “the One Million Signatures Campaign was only good until its organisers had not objected the Islamic laws and the political systems that exist in this country. As soon as you do it, your actions will lose their effectiveness”.

For Mahtab, a change in discriminatory laws, as her ideal condition, is impossible under the current situation in Iran. She describes women’s rights activities in Iran as “being multiplied by zero” as the state has made any efforts to change the status quo very costly: “we [women’s rights activists] have all sort of problems, legal problems, security and safety issues, financial issues”. Shiva has participated in women’s rights movements in the past when more opportunities were available for political undertakings:

At some point these movements stopped working because they were reliant on visiting grand ayatollahs to ask for fatwas while the state was resisting against it. They [activists] had to negotiate with the state and these negotiations did not work after a while. [When Khatami’s presidency ended] and the Reformists were no longer in power, these movements stopped working. There is no capacity for change [in the state at the moment]. There are some state institutions that are strongly resisting against any change.

Shiva nevertheless sees a great potential in society (and among people) for a change in favour of women. Although there are no active feminist movements in Iran at the moment, Shiva argues, feminist movements have been successful in familiarising “different layers of society” with women’s issues and changing the society’s view towards women’s issues at different levels: among families, within organisations and even in a policy making level: “though the laws in Iran do not give many rights to married women<sup>21</sup>, I know plenty of men who since ten years ago have [voluntarily] given these rights to their wives through official channels”.

*Indirect* strategies, on the other hand, aim to make changes in women’s position in society through increasing public awareness about gender issues. Unlike the direct strategies that focus on alteration of major policies at the higher levels of the state, the indirect approaches try to make a shift in people’s perceptions of traditional gender roles without falling into a direct struggle with

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<sup>21</sup> Women in Iran have a limited right for the custody of their children. They cannot work, travel or even apply for a passport without their husbands’ permission. They cannot ask for a divorce either.

the state. Following the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency and the major changes that took place in the political environment in Iran, more women's rights activists seem to have turned to such approaches as a substitute for political activities. These strategies which are not always driven by a desire for equality, mainly focus on women from the lower social class in order to help them integrate into society and familiarise them with their rights. Shiva, Nazanin, and Mahtab have been involved in such activities.

Shiva argues that an improvement in women's status under the current situation in society has to be done at three levels. The first is the *individual* level through which working-class women (and generally those women who are submissive to their male relatives to the extent that are dependent on them for living) are provided with support *to* obtain the necessary skill sets to succeed in the community: "if you go to Khavaran (a poor area in Tehran) you will see that those women are not mentally capable of having a social life. They don't know how to look after themselves". These women, Shiva argues, need to learn skills to have effective social interactions and build their self-confidence and agency in order to re-enter the society and make income.

The *middle* level, Shiva argues, includes the formation of groups and networks of intellectual middle-class women who organise training courses and workshops for working-class women. Shiva holds the view that there are certain "values" among the middle-class women – financial independence for instance – that should be "transferred" to the working-class women as many women who live in underprivileged areas are not familiar with them. Shiva makes a contrast between the women's rights activists who challenged the state to change the discriminatory laws and those activists who focus on empowerment of working-class women:

Feminists are divided into different groups. That group of feminists [who try to challenge the state] are more well-known between people whereas we have Marxist feminists who believe in women's empowerment and believe that women should be financially self-reliant and enter the social arenas. The Marxist feminists say legal issues [and discriminatory laws] only belong to middle-class women. For a working-class woman the main issue is her security as her husband might beat her to death or she cannot walk outside because of lack of security.

The third level in changing women's position in Shiva's view is the *structural* level which includes political acts by which women demand their rights from the state. Nazanin spends a considerable time in voluntary activities whose main focus is providing support for women in

poorer areas of Tehran. She, for instance, teaches women from working class families the effective ways of communication, self-confidence, household management and generally “anything that increases in them liveliness, hope, the desire for a change” and help them integrate back to society. For Nazanin women from poorer families have fewer opportunities to be present in society or participate in social activities and these training courses and workshops provided them with opportunity and facilities to experience social interactions:

In fact we train them to do community development tasks. We form women’s groups in each neighbourhood whose aim is development of that area and resolving its issues in a collaborative way [...]. We do not [directly] teach them concepts such as gender equality but depending on the level of their analytical skills these courses might increase their awareness on equality as we help them analyse such issues. They should themselves come to the conclusion that achieving success in some areas requires gender equality.

Mahtab also spends a significant time on voluntary activities regarding women. She highlights the role of women’s rights activists in society as the mediators between people and the state to demand changes in the gender policies and the discriminatory laws. Since almost all civil society organisations are suppressed by the state, Mahtab argues, activists are mainly focusing on teaching small local groups of women how to improve their confidence, sense of agency and be empowered. She argues that although these training courses are mainly focused on women’s occupation, employment and vocational skills, the final objective of these classes is raising women’s awareness (directly or indirectly) on gender equality:

Our aim in all what we do is increasing gender equality whether directly or indirectly. Some of our courses are merely planned to raise women’s awareness about gender equality and all the lessons directly address it. In some other courses the concept of gender equality might not be addressed directly. It really depends on the audience [and their capacity of learning about these concepts] and the environment in which we work [and how conservative the organisers are].

An emancipatory subjectivity involves a strong opposition to other subjective determinations which would tend to be seen as oppressive. It is, first of all, in strong opposition to an Islamist subjectivity which is typically the basis of a striving for power in women. Mahtab has notable views towards both the tradition and modernity. Although she does not talk about an actual division, for her the tradition falls into the good or *favourable* tradition that she admires, as against what she considers the *unfavourable* tradition. The favourable traditional values, that is, those that favour the position of women, for Mahtab are those that not only do not constitute obstacles in her



way (as a feminist and women's rights activist), but can sometimes play an inspiring role in her life. The favourable tradition is well exemplified in Mahtab's mother and grandmother, whom she refers to as 'her heroes'. Her mother, an illiterate woman from a working-class family, has formed a women's group in the local neighbourhood whose objective is to support local women in different ways. Mahtab admires her mother as she has never discouraged her for her activities the way mothers of her feminist friends do:

My mother does not approve my lifestyle. Although she supports other women (in her women's group) but she is generally very traditional and religious. She has never been discouraging to me. I owe what I am doing to my mother.

Mahtab's grandmother, an illiterate woman who married three times, believed in women's power and was in favour of women's employment as a means for making women independent and empowered in relation to their husbands: "my grandmother used to say that a girl should not get married before having a job". Mahtab calls her grandmother a "natural feminist" and a strong woman who would not want to be confined to home or tolerate a lower position in relation to her husband: "she was a supporter of Khatami and advertised him on streets during the pre-presidential elections period at the age of ninety" and "she started learning reading and writing at the age of one hundred and three". This form of tradition for Mahtab, although different from the way she lives, is admirable.

On the other hands is what Mahtab believes to be the unfavourable tradition or the identitarian and patriarchal tradition, which she strongly rejects. Mahtab refers to these traditions as "the structures that include a great deal of gender and ethnic discriminations" and "result in further consumerism". She is, for instance, against those women who, while claiming to be modern and non-religious and despite being "great customers for capitalism", still abide by "festered traditions": "they look fashionable, they don't believe in hijab, but still ask for virginity certificate from their daughter in laws". In a similar way, she holds the view that modernity can have favourable and unfavourable sides: the 'good' modernity consists of the procedures that challenge those unfavourable traditions, change people's perceptions towards them and help people "know about the doxa". The un-favourable modernity that promotes consumerism does not go deeper than people's looks or penetrate their deepest beliefs: "the modernisation [modern tools] does not affect parts of you which are involved with [unfavourable] traditions. It does not change the doxa as Bourdieu says".

In a similar way, Foroogh sees two aspects to modernity. One is about new ideas and alternatives that prepare the individual to live based on modern needs. She believes that it is this side of modernity that opposes tradition and challenges the old, obsolete and sometimes erroneous rules that women, for generations, have been made to follow. She rejects the stereotypes that many women in traditional families are bound to. She, for instance, criticises those women (including her own sisters) who devote their lives to their husbands and families, ignore their potentials and “don’t have anything to think about outside their marriage”. She also challenges these stereotypes as she believes: “maybe what we are asked to do from the past are not good things or maybe they suited the previous generations and not us”.

For Foroogh the ‘good’ modernity includes the new ideas that challenge and question the patriarchal traditional values: “the new generations should not accept those stereotypes. They need to think if there are better things more suitable for our times”. On the other hand, she sees another aspect to modernity i.e. the modern tools and technology as things which can only change people’s appearance and lifestyle and are not able to challenge those patriarchal stereotypes:

I even see it in my students. I see that although their lives are different with their mothers’ in terms of external aspects, which means they are more modern, but they are not modern intellectually. They use refrigerators and cars but in terms of their views they are the same as their mothers.

Nazanin’s views about modernity and tradition are not much different from Mahtab and Foroogh’s. For Nazanin, modernity (and even an easy the access to information through modern technology) could help people to find the contradictions between what they have been taught through their families and the realities of society. For her, therefore, modernity can help women to be free from the imposed traditions and “question the religious identities” that they have been made to accept:

This easy access to information in the current world help people find contradictions between what they have been taught through families and school and the realities that actually exist in society. Modernity also makes people identity-less as they start to question the identity they were identified by for years.

These views towards modernity and tradition can be compared to Azam’s views, as an Islamist woman. Azam sees Iranian society as a profoundly traditional society where people act based on traditional values for even the most private parts of their lives. She does not see two sides

to modernity. For her, modernity is first of all *pervasive* in a way that everybody uses modern tools for instance and secondly, *useful* as it has made life easier for people. However, for Azam, modernity is not strong enough to remove tradition from people's mind. She, therefore, is in favour of tradition, but also does not see modernity as strong enough to defeat it.

By way of summary it can be said here that an emancipatory subjectivity consists in seeing other human beings beyond the identities defined for them by the state, the patriarchal system or society, as well as in denying any superiority of some human beings over others as a result of their gender, religion, race or nationality. A majority of women driven by emancipatory determinations are educated and belong to the intellectual classes conceived of in a broad sense, and many of them are in fact women's rights activists. It was shown in this section that this does not mean that these women are driven by a full-fledged emancipatory subjectivity in their everyday lives and that the emancipatory conviction in all of them might not be manifested in the form of activism.

In spite of the fact that being an activist in the current situation in Iran is risky and can even lead to imprisonment, there are still women who continue their activities to improve women's status in Iran. But there has been a major twist in such activities. In the last decade, women's rights activists addressed the patriarchy in the state and the discriminatory laws through street gatherings, rallies and campaigns. After a major suppression of such activities and imprisonment of some of these women during Ahmadinejad's presidency, women's rights activists have chosen strategies that avoid a direct confrontation with the state and focuses on increasing awareness of women from working class families.

### **Dynamics of women's inner conflicts: a comparison between Pooran, Mahtab and Azam**

The current section attempts to provide additional conceptual analysis on women's subjective field through examining Pooran's main convictions and inner conflicts and comparing them with the inner convictions and desires of Mahtab (a secular feminist) and Azam (an Islamist woman). These comparisons will be particularly done in relation to each woman's position towards the current structure of power in Iran (and the Islamic Revolution), on one hand, and their views and approaches towards women's issues and feminism, on the other.

As was explained above in connection with traditionalist subjectivities, the main reason for addressing Pooran's subjective determinations in a separate section is the existence of remarkable

and rather contradictory aspects in Pooran's subjective makeup. On the one hand, she is bound to certain traditional values and is deeply religious; and yet, on the other hand, she chooses modern alternatives that challenge the tradition. In other words, while adhering to aspects of religious and Iranian traditions, she rejects those aspects of tradition that she finds backward and troublesome. She is consequently torn between different subjective tendencies such as the subjectivity of desire for security and solace, the subjectivity of desire for the West and occasional Islamist and egalitarian elements that can be explained not only in relation to her current position but also regarding her childhood and early adulthood.

Pooran is fifty six years old, middle class and educated. Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in which she actively participated, her profession and main activities have all been directly related to women and solving women's issues (mainly legal, economic and educational) at the national and policy making level. Pooran is against collective and individual political acts (gatherings, campaigns and street protests) that many feminists have been engaged in, as she considers them ineffective and even troublesome. Instead she tries to address women's issues at the state level, mainly by challenging the government and the parliament to change the laws in favour of women. She, for instance, produces television programs about women and organises women's social meetings whose participants are mainly the political elite.

Both Pooran and Mahtab are involved in women-related activities and both assert that solving women's issues (at different levels) are their main concerns. There are, however, major differences between Pooran's perspective and approach, and what Mahtab undertakes for advancing women's rights. The first major difference lies in the extent of the change that they seek, a difference which is itself related in a substantial way to the nature of their relationship with the state.

The activities that Mahtab carries out to advance gender equality are in an apparent opposition to the values of the Islamic Republic whose constitution is founded upon Sharia laws and does not authorise the equality of men and women. The change that Mahtab seeks for women is more fundamental (than Pooran's) and can potentially challenge the very foundations of the regime. Being both secular and feminist, Mahtab finds herself in strong opposition to a state whose entire identity hinges almost entirely upon religion and hostility to the West. Moreover, by rejecting hijab and the state's definition of the ideal (Muslim) woman, Mahtab would seem to be

fighting a frontline battle with the Islamic regime. All these differences undoubtedly put her in a very vulnerable position, to the point that she is constantly at risk of losing her job and even imprisonment.

Mahtab's position towards the state, however, is flexible. Due to the constant changes in political status in Iran (for instance the rise and fall of the Reformists, ultra-conservatives etc.) many women's rights activists including Mahtab have resorted, as was discussed earlier, to indirect strategies as a substitution for more direct political acts. This change in strategies took place in parallel with a change of priorities, so that instead of directly seeking changes in policies and the legal system, many women activists have resorted to awareness raising activities. However, for some women's rights activists, particularly those who live in exile, opposing the forced wearing of hijab is still a priority and this causes severe reactions from the state.<sup>22</sup> Mahtab argues that although she does not believe in wearing hijab herself, however, opposing it is no longer her first priority and instead she tries to help women find ways to remove their barriers and these solutions are based on their local culture, background and potentials:

As an activist I should not look down [upon women]. My interventions should be based on the context and I do not do whatever I want. For example, if I want to prioritise women's issues in Iran, hijab won't be even my tenth priority although every day I am suffering wearing it. My first priority is elimination of violence against women and I think elimination of all sort of violence is strongly emancipatory for women.

In her struggles to improve women's status, Pooran mainly addresses the state and does not directly deal with women. Unlike Mahtab who is in touch and deals with working-class women, Pooran seeks changes at the policy level which requires her to be in a direct contact with the political (Islamist) elite rather than ordinary women. Pooran's criticism of the state is mainly limited to women's issues and she neither means to criticise the leadership of the system nor does she question the state's main pillars. In other words, instead of a direct confrontation with the regime, she negotiates with it to change the laws, policies and regulations that might improve women's educational, economic and legal status. This different approach i.e. negotiation rather than opposition, puts Pooran in a different position towards the state. Despite the suppression of a

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<sup>22</sup> An example of this is My Stealthy Freedom an online movement that was commenced against the imposed hijab in Iran in 2014 by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-born journalist and activist who lives in the United States (Wynarczyk 2016).

majority of women's rights activists and imprisonment of many of them in the recent years, Pooran does not seem to have any concerns in relation to the state as she keeps working with the state-run television broadcasts. The reasons are, first of all, that she is religious and adheres to the Iranian state's ideal of womanhood, and secondly, that she rejects feminism and any affiliation with it.

Sanam Vakil (2011, p. 8) categorises women like Pooran as "traditional women" who are "supporters and initial collaborators with the Islamic Republic" and "have worked and continue to work within the system to advance, protect and alter laws and policies affecting women" through referring to "the Quran and its teachings". For Vakil (2011, p. 9), this kind of women, despite their apparent opposition to feminism, can be considered as Islamic feminists as she believes that "women who identify with Islamic feminism as a strategy to challenge gender issues do not always claim an Islamic feminist identity".

Another major difference between Mahtab and Pooran's women-related activities lies in the purposes they have and the determination with which they pursue them. Mahtab's activities, as explained in the previous section, are mainly built upon her egalitarian views towards gender equality. On the other hand, Pooran's main reason to challenge the laws and policies is that she finds them unfair and discriminatory compared to what she believes to be a true Islamic justice.

My most important concern is that all the facilities in the country be used in order to eliminate discrimination that has produced many problems for women in different aspects. This means that the entire system (the state) should be active and the civil society should put effort to address women's problems and open the way for women to grow. To solve the problems that women face because of being a woman.

She in fact rejects the concept of gender equality when she maintains that "in the Islamic perspective we do not use concepts such as equality and inequality". According to Islam, Pooran argues, the emphasis is on "an individual's human identity" rather than equality. She holds the view that "Quran instead uses the term single soul" for men and women which means they have "the same entity and identity" but they are not equal. Instead of gender equality she, therefore, believes in Islamic "gender justice" and the fact that both men and women are given specific roles by God:

When we talk about equality we assume that one person is the main and the other person is equal to him or her and discrimination lies in this view. Discrimination means the lack

of justice. In Islamic view when a baby is born all the costs of the mother is the man's responsibility. This is justice.

Pooran believes that if a woman is not provided with the facilities to undertake her (motherhood) roles, she is subject to discrimination. Thus, unlike Mahtab whose main concern in gender inequality, Pooran's fights for what she believes to be Islamic 'justice and rights' for women. She argues that there are discriminatory laws and regulations within the current system that are contrary to the Revolution's early purpose i.e. seeking justice. Pooran also believes that the Iranian Revolution stood on women's shoulders as not only did they participate in the protests next to men, but they also planted the seeds of the Revolution in society (years before the Revolution) by teaching their children "the love to Imam Hussain". The movement led by Imam Hussain (the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) is a symbol of justice seeking for Pooran. She holds the view that in a similar way to Imam Hussain, who fought against the corrupt rulers of his time, the Islamic Revolution was meant to bring justice back to Iranian society. Those men who participated in the Revolution, Pooran argues, were the same children who were enthused by the love to Imam Hussain and his message about the freedom conveyed to them through their mothers:

They say women made up over half of the people who participated in the Revolution. My idea is that people came to streets with three main slogans: independence, freedom, the Islamic Republic [...]. These are three concepts which have been internalised in people through women in about twenty years. I mean the role of women in the Revolution goes back to twenty years before the Revolution. I say [the victory of the Revolution] was all because of women. [At the time of the Revolution] when a man comes to streets and screams 'I want independence and freedom', this desire has been internalised in him at some point. These demands had been inserted in people's minds in houses and through women.

Pooran argues that after the Revolution, women have been marginalised and unacknowledged and have not been given their due in a way that would reflect the part they had played in the Revolution: "those Muslim women who had stood for the Revolution under the name of Islam should have seen an elimination of discrimination or a gender neutral approach [which are two bases] of Islam. But they constantly faced with oppositions". Pooran, however, does not blame the leaders of the Revolution (including Ayatollah Khomeini) for women's marginalisation. She holds the view that although Khomeini and the circle of his close friends would want to give more parts to women in political arenas, there were other influential men who would resist. Thus, since she believes in discrimination against women in the aftermath of the Revolution, Pooran has

attempted to claim what she claims to be ‘women’s share’ within the system. A good example of this is her efforts to change the laws on women’s inheritance as well as blood money for which she met the former president, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, himself:

We went to see Mr. Hashemi-Rafsanjani and told him that we wanted to change two things. One was increasing the share of a woman’s inheritance after her husband passes away and the other one was the women’s blood money (diyya) to be equal to men’s. We referred to Quranic reasoning [to justify our requests].

Taken together, the above accounts suggest that while Mahtab seeks major changes in the structure of power on the basis of equality, Pooran’s approach in addressing women’s issues, i.e. accepting the state’s ideology while attempting to make it more amenable to women’s issues as well as seeking a greater share for women, is not based on a belief on gender equality. All this can be further clarified by undertaking a further comparison, this time between Pooran and Azam.

The first important difference between these two women (Pooran and Azam) concerns their approaches to the state and to women’s issues. Azam’s current social, political and economic position/status directly benefits from her relationship with the ruling system, for which she promotes the state ideal of a ‘Muslim woman’. In Pooran’s case, however, while she is certainly willing to stay within the system, she nevertheless keeps her distance from it. This is evident in the fact that her main interest and focus has been resolving women’s issues rather than seeking state positions the way many Islamist women did after the Revolution. The difference between Azam and Pooran is also manifested in their choices of outfit. During the interview, Pooran’s hair was fully covered by a long headscarf and she was wearing a long loose manteaux that covered her whole body except for her hands and feet. Despite this extreme emphasis on covering her hair and body, Pooran refuses to wear the state-endorsed black chador (on top of her scarf and manteaux) the way Azam and many Islamist women do.

While Pooran criticises the state institutions that have a bearing on women’s affairs precisely for neglecting women’s issues, Azam mainly reaffirms the state’s gender policies and tries to maintain the status-quo. In dealing with women’s issues, Azam does not talk about a change, she prefers to maintain (and even revive) the traditional gender roles. On the other hand is Pooran who, instead of portraying an ideal image of women’s status after the Revolution the way Azam does, is rather realistic about women’s current status. Unlike Azam who sees women’s status



as satisfactory without questioning the state, Pooran holds the view that in the thirty five years after the Revolution women's problems have remained untouched. She refers mainly to three reasons for the marginalisation of women. One reason for banishment of women's issues from the state's agenda is the male dominated structure of the state and the male authorities whose main priorities are anything but women's issues:

They [the male authorities and leaders] don't care about women's issues. If we, women, have a request [from the state] we cannot have it done [only] by asking them to do it as these men won't do anything for us. It is a simplistic view [that men will help us]. [...] Male authorities have proved in these thirty something years [since the Revolution] that women's issues mean nothing to them. It is a false expectation [if we, women, think] that President Rafsanjani [for instance] would propose a bill to the parliament in favour of women.

Pooran's second reason to explain the marginalisation of women in Iran is that for her, women's demands are lost among the competition between political groups and their quests for power. She holds the view that instead of planning to solve women's genuine issues, women who hold executive positions in the state are involved in "the political games between the main political groups" (Reformists, conservatives, etc.) and can easily be manipulated by them. Many of her main critiques are in fact addressed at one of her friends, who occupies a position in the government in relation to women's issues. She holds the view that her friend and other female authorities "pretend" that they try to help women but instead they take no fundamental steps towards solving women's problems: "my main critique to [...] [her friend] is that why she doesn't do anything infrastructural [for women]. Passing of a bill in parliament [in favour of women] is infrastructural for instance but they do nothing". Since there is no organisations that supervises the performance of the state in relation to woman's affairs, Pooran who calls herself a "women's rights activist who supports no particular political groups" has been trying to challenge and critique the state.

Pooran sees feminists and secular women's rights activists as another major barrier against solution of women's "unsolvable" issues in Iran. She criticises secular feminists for "political exploitation of women's issues", which she claims is done in order to oppose to the regime. For many feminists, Pooran claims, women's actual issues are not of any priority and instead they raise and highlight certain disputes such as imposed hijab or women's presence at sports stadiums that are considered as "sensitive" issues for the ruling system and may be interpreted as an opposition

to Islam. Consequently, male authorities see all women's rights activists as potential 'subversive elements' and this view not only does not help women in general but also does make the situation more complicated for them.

Pooran also criticises women's rights activists (particularly secular feminists) for causing contradictions within families and particularly between men and women. The tradition, Pooran maintains, has always had its own mechanisms to support both women and marriage. Feminism (which for Pooran is hand in hand with individualism) on the other hand, tries to destroy the traditional culture which for centuries has existed within the families. She believes that feminists encourage women to ignite fight against men and try to win the battle against them whereas in the past when a disagreement arose between a husband and wife, they always strove for reconciliation: "in our culture and according to the identity of our society these [feminist] ways don't work [...] because our culture is about tolerance, serenity, reconciliation and modification".

Knowing and examining the circumstance, forces and motives that are at the core of Pooran's concerns can help us see better the nature of her inner conflicts. One major aspect of her subjective makeup is her strong bond with traditions, values and principles. She is undoubtedly loyal to certain values and is not willing to compromise them; indeed, she goes further and tries to make other people recognise and respect her own values, and objects to anyone who acts against her "principles":

I am a principled person. I generally tolerate people [...]. I respect the other person. Some issues are negotiable between us but I never let anybody cross the red line. I don't let anybody judge my personality or analyse it. I try to evaluate the situation and define my situation based on that. [...] For instance, if somebody always humiliates women, I would not let him do it to me. I define what annoys me very well so that the other person wouldn't let himself to cross the lines.

Pooran emphasised the role of tradition in strengthening families and the relationships between men and women several times during the interview. She believes that throughout history families have created mechanisms based on both their ancient culture and religion to deal with the problems regarding family and marriage. For instance, in speaking about reconciliation of a married couple after an argument, Pooran argued that "in both Iranian and Islamic culture" neither women nor men would like to fight [and end the marriage]" and instead they try to find solutions with the help of their families. For Pooran this approach i.e. negotiation and reconciliation rather

than fighting and divorce is the opposite of what “individualism” (and feminism which is based on individualism) is trying to promote between couples:

The outcome of individualism is that if my rights are in conflict with your rights I will fight with you. But according to the culture and identity of an Iranian and Muslim woman, neither of men or women would want to tear the family apart. The sanctity of the marriage and family is maintained.

Despite this strong emphasis on the role of tradition, Pooran is also a carrier of other subjective tendencies and determinations. She is for instance pulled by modern tendencies, and this includes elements from both a modernity subordinated to capitalism and a different modernity which can involve emancipatory aspects. Elements of the first type of modernity i.e. the one subordinated to capitalism, often emerged during the interview. Not only did she often use sociological or general English terms, but she also talked in favour of civil society, NGOs, women’s rights and women’s empowerment and opposed domestic violence and “sexist jokes”. This frequent usage of such terms indicates that she might have unconsciously absorbed ideas from (secular) feminists and interpreted them through Islamic prism. Furthermore, Pooran has a rational approach to deal with any issues. In Pooran’s view each problem resembles a project for which she tries to find solutions and strategies. For instance, one of her main strategies in order to deal with women’s legal status consists in conducting negotiations with the ulama (grand ayatollahs) and male authorities, including the president himself. She believes that convincing these men and changing their views towards women’s issues in their own language (the hadith and Quranic verses for instance) is more effective than protests and attracting media attention:

I follow strategic goals, it means that I deal with the government and the parliament [...] in two levels: one is evaluating and criticizing what they are currently doing [regarding women’s issues]. I personally write several letters to the president and the vice president but more important than that is the other level [which is questioning the authorities for] the things that they must do [for women] and they don’t [...] for instance infrastructural acts.

Pooran is occasionally driven by certain subjective aspects that can be considered as an emancipatory conviction. In dealing with women’s issues, for instance, she tries to look at the bigger picture and the root causes that can make a change in women’s status instead of focusing on one particular problem. She believes that in Iran “men are victims of lack of education” and challenges the state to advance education on gender issues:

If someone tells “sexists jokes” in a family gathering, although I am aware of it, I do not react to it as I do not want to destroy the party. [...] My goal is not to educate the people in that party. We try to change the society”.

This desire for being effective and contributing to what she considers real change in Pooran had been formed a few decades earlier through witnessing, observing and living among an organised network of women in her neighbourhood with her mother as an active member and an organiser. These women were able to, in a way totally independent from men, support each other in different ways and through running religious sessions, lending money to each other in case of hardship, group works, solving family issues/conflicts, supporting women in case of domestic violence. Pooran believes that it was this working together under the name of religion would boost self-confidence in them:

The reasons I started becoming interested in women’s issues is mainly because my mother was a religious woman and we always had religious sessions at home. [...] I don’t know when this interest in women’s issues was formed in me but as long as I remember, there has always been [talks about] women’s issues [at our home]. There was a local network which I can tell it was a sort of NGO where women could come and raise their issues [...]. For young women and women like my mother [that network] was [a place for] teaching/learning, a place for socializing and to raise their issues.

Pooran believes that one benefit of such local women’s groups was to provide women with the chance to experience social and organisational activities even for those women who did not have strong religious beliefs. It was a network which would work based on trust and since the activities were done under the name of God, people would support it. She argues that these groups were in fact a sort of “civil society organisation” which was organised and supported by ordinary people. One difference between the traditional networks and women’s NGOs according to Pooran is that people are nowadays reluctant to help NGOs whereas they still donate considerable money and goods to religious charities and these donations are mostly done on the basis of religious beliefs and faith: “the donor is aware of his/her intentions as all these people think they are trading with God”.

Pooran is a self-confident woman who manifests a considerable ability to act and express her opinions freely. She fought against the restrictions that her parents had put on her. It is thus correct to say that she revolted against what she believed to be the ‘backward tradition’ and chose the path that very few women had chosen before: firstly, she went to university at a time when

very few women did and secondly, she refused to get married in a traditional way and instead she got married to her colleague at the time when most marriages were arranged by parents. Her mother was similarly, although to a lesser extent, driven by contradictory desires. On one hand she insisted on her daughter's education. To make it happen she spent all her savings to provide the tuition fee to send Pooran to a "private Islamic high school" despite her father's disagreement. On the other hand she insisted on the belief that her daughter should get married at a young age – a request that Pooran never complied with. Pooran's mother was even against her activities, i.e. changing the laws based on a more women friendly interpretation of the Sharia:

My mother is a religious woman. Once in a family gathering someone asked me what I was doing. I answered: 'I am doing a research [to suggest to the state] to increase a woman's share of inheritance which at that time used to be one eighth of her husband's properties'. My mother [got angry and] said: 'you want to change what the God and his prophet have said. How can someone change the religion of God and his prophet?' I said: 'dear mother, you are a Quran teacher, where in Quran it is said that women should inherit one eighth?'

Pooran's father, unlike her mother, would not agree with her education and intended to confine her to home. He, for instance, would not allow Pooran to go to high school and university, let alone to participate in street protests. In opposition to this form of traditional patriarchy of which Pooran's father is a typical example, there is the call from Ayatollah Khomeini, a "religious leader", to women so as to encourage them to exit their houses and participate in the Revolution:

Imam [Khomeini] issued a fatwa [for women] at the time of the Revolution saying that if your fathers and husbands don't let you go out to participate in demonstrations, you don't have to listen to them.

The young woman (Pooran at the time of the Revolution) must have found Khomeini's call rather liberating. She admires "Khomeini's school of thought" as she believes it gave women confidence and a voice: "the Revolution gave self-esteem to women". Ayatollah Khomeini, in Pooran's view, invited women to participate in public political life and officially recognised women's right to vote:

When you look at all the fatwas during the Revolution, you see that [Khomeini's school of taught] suggested a new perspective on women and a new identity for them which is a woman has the right to choose, she has independence of thought, she has right to vote.

In young Pooran's view, not only was Khomeini's invitation Godly – and therefore morally justified – but also it released her from the authority of her father – even if later on many women were to realise that such liberation from paternal authority (her father) meant subjection to a higher paternal authority (the religious leaders of the Revolution):

I was a university student at the time of the Revolution. My father did not agree with my political activities. I had packed a suitcase [with my personal stuff in it] and had put it under my bed. My father said he would tell the police about my activities because he did not want me to go to the demonstrations and be arrested. I made it clear for him that I had my suitcase ready and [if he wouldn't let me to] I would leave.

It was therefore her sense of audacity and fearlessness together with the desire for freedom that brought Pooran to the streets at the time of the Revolution. Pooran chose what she thought was a new, empowering and promising male authority over the old backward one. There was, however, no emancipation in this so-called liberation. In fact, Pooran and many women like her, while being released from a 'housebound' existence thanks to their participation in the Revolution, found such release soon became a new subjection to a new identity: a Muslim woman who, while being empowered enough to leave her house and support the Islamic regime, should never forget that leaving the domestic realm was conditional upon supporting the Islamic regime in an active way and therefore becoming the breeder of the next generation:

Women's empowerment [in Khomeini's view] is important but at the same time since women raise the next generation [...] Imam Khomeini insists that women don't lose this role.

### **Iranian women's subjectivities: main findings and initial conclusion**

Twenty-two Iranian women were interviewed using an interview guide designed so as to bring out their desires and longings, essentially what they ultimately stand and strive for in their lives. The idea was to explore whether it was possible to identify distinct subjective patterns which would constitute specific subjectivities, a subjectivity being understood as a highly dynamic form of conviction and affect which drives an individual or group to conduct their lives in a relatively constant and consistent fashion. The initial framework used in Part I of this research investigated women's position and their subjectivities on the basis of their relation to the opposition between capitalist globalisation and Islamisation. However, as discussed before, this opposition cannot on its own account for the women's subjective field as a whole and depict its dynamism and

complexity. Thus, a new model, based on the conclusions drawn from the review of the literature and an initial analysis of the results of the interviews, as well as directly inspired by Alain Badiou's (2016b) scheme of the contemporary structure of the world, was used for the empirical research which allows us to grasp both the relative stability and the fluidity of women's subjective dispositions.

The new framework is defined on the basis of two major oppositions: capitalism vs. emancipation, and modernity vs. tradition (to make explicit the relation to religion the latter may also be rendered as modernity/secularism vs. tradition/religion). This is a highly dynamic field, with a tension-ridden centre defined by the intersection of the two dimensions and four subjective poles or determinations (in Figure 1, in a counter clockwise direction: modernity, capitalism, tradition and emancipation) pulling that centre toward themselves or, to express it differently, inviting subjective incorporation. This conflictive interplay between four subjective determinations reflects the tensions and ambiguities of contemporary subjectivities.

Now out of this dynamic field of forces four main subjective forms or subjectivities (the idea of 'form' is meant to emphasise the distinct and well-defined character of each subjectivity) may emerge, each one being essentially the result of the interplay of two subjective poles or determinations, although often maintaining links with the other two determinations, e.g. in the form of rejection. Thus, a subjectivity of desire for the West, reflecting the fascination for capitalist modernity, is the result of the interplay between capitalism and modernity, and it may involve a (strong) rejection of religion. An Islamist subjectivity is likewise the result of the interplay between two determinations, capitalism and tradition-religion.

The subjectivities emerging out of the interaction between tradition-religion and emancipation may be rather varied and are often less distinct than the subjectivity of desire for the West and the Islamist subjectivity: they can include what is known in the literature as Islamic feminism, and also what I have called 'traditionalist subjectivities', which maintain a looser relation to emancipation (e.g. in the form of showing a certain care for others and even participating in help or charitable activities) but may also show a strong opposition to dogmatic or fundamentalist understandings of religion. It is this combination of, on the one hand, elements and aspects that may potentially be emancipatory, and the rejection of an Islamist subjectivity, on the other, that pushes these traditionalist subjectivities toward the emancipatory determination.

Finally, emancipatory subjectivities are the result of the interplay between emancipation and modernity. The modernity at stake here is an emancipatory modernity, that is, a modernity radically opposite to the aforementioned capitalist modernity.

The Islamist and desire for the West subjectivities constitute (particularly when compared with the other two main subjectivities that been identified: traditionalist subjectivities and partially emancipatory subjectivities) the two most distinctive subjective forms that can be observed in Iran. They are both, tellingly, on the side of capitalism, while the two subjectivities on the side of emancipation are less distinctive and, as is particularly the case of that resulting from the interplay of emancipation and modernity, not fully formed or made up of emancipatory tendencies and elements which only rarely come to constitute a consistent subjective form.

The Islamist subjectivity is essentially the result of the interplay between capitalism and tradition-religion. It rests heavily on a strong defence of specific forms of Islamic religion or a politicised religion which is actually the version of Islam defended by the state. Such an adherence to religion does not merely remain at the inner level of the person, but is publicly manifested in the form of promoting and even trying to impose it in social life, in accordance with state policies. These two features unmistakably suggest that we are in the presence of a strongly statist form of religiosity. Such drive to impose a particular view of religion is intimately and deeply linked to a personal quest for power whereby religion and adherence to the state are used as a means to gain status and power.

As discussed in chapter five of this thesis, the female Islamist subjectivity exists in the rest of the Muslim world in countries such as Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan, with women widely joining Islamist groups. An important difference between the female Islamist subjectivity in Iran and in other Muslim contexts is that in Iran this subjectivity is highly influenced by the Shia identity and the ‘worshiping’ of Shia heroine figures. Imam Hussain, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, for instance, has always been treated and endorsed as the symbol of bravery and fighting against oppression. Similarly, Fatima, the daughter of the prophet and Imam Hussain’s mother, and Zaynab her daughter (the paragons of agency and courage on one hand and modesty and chastity on the other hand) have been introduced to women as the models for a female Muslim identity. This creates a main distinction between Islamist subjectivity in Iran and the rest of the Middle East with majority Sunni populations.



A second major difference between Islamist subjectivity in Iran and other Muslim societies is the unique state formation in Iran that has provided the ground for the manifestation of a new form of Islamist subjectivity which is rather distinctive in the Muslim world. While in many countries in the Middle East there are dictatorships and restrictive rules for women in one form or another, in Iran the existence of certain democratic elements within an autocratic structure involves certain levels of toleration in the state in relation to change and, crucially, a space for women's participation in government. Such a context has led to the formation of an unprecedented form of Islamist subjective form in women such as Pooran, who despite confirming the principles of the Islamic regime, criticises patriarchy in it and tries to make changes in policies and laws in favour of women. It is the existence of women such as Pooran – who in some contexts are referred to as Islamist feminists – within the ruling elite that differentiates Islamist subjectivity in Iran from other Muslim countries.

A subjectivity of desire for the West, which is the result of the interplay between capitalism and modernity, involves a form of individualistic growth and personal development based on materialistic and market-oriented standards. This desire for personal advancement, unlike the Islamist and traditionalist subjectivities, is not motivated or influenced by tradition and particularly religious values, but is instead inspired or very strongly influenced by Western models, particularly the enticing image of the West that the media have universally created. This subjective form creates in individuals a sense of satisfaction for living in modern times and having access to technological gadgets, coupled with a (constant) concern with social advancement and thus with higher education, good employment as well as fashionable looks and lifestyles. Women strongly driven by this subjectivity are generally aware of their rights and seek more individual share for women in the job and financial market.

The traditionalist subjectivities consist of a strong desire to submit to and follow as well as support and promote most forms of tradition: religious values, nationalist sentiments, local and regional customs or a combination of them. Thus, traditionalist subjectivities are carried by women who identify themselves more or less strongly with nationalist (being Iranian) and/or Muslim identities and associate themselves with traditional roles related to motherhood and/or wifeness.

Traditionalist subjectivities are also involved with non-material aspirations and spiritual tendencies which often lead to a self-control against the bodily temptations in the individual,

avoiding sins or ungodly thoughts and/or living one's life on the basis of Islamic moralities, honour, and chastity. It can create in individual women a strong sense of self-awareness that can guide them, so the carriers of this subjectivity claim, towards 'goodness', purity, piety, benevolence and compassion towards those in need and even a participation in charitable activities. This desire for compassion and benevolence – although not the same as an emancipatory subjectivity – when moving to a larger environment, might result in forms of conduct and action with some emancipatory implications and a desire in the individual to be a part of larger movements for helping other human beings.

The emancipatory subjectivity or, as it should perhaps be called, a partially emancipatory subjectivity, is basically the result of the interplay between emancipation and modernity/secularism. The basis for this subjectivity is the idea that human beings are equal despite the identities given to them by society, religions and culture. Having in mind the risks involved in egalitarian political activities in Iran, an individual's belief on equality might not manifest itself in one's openly standing up for equality in society or active involvement in movements that challenge patriarchy. To put it another way, one may treat other people in everyday life on the basis of the idea of gender equality but not participate in emancipatory movements so as to avoid the risk of repression and imprisonment.

An important aspect of this partially emancipatory subjectivity is that it tends to see religion as a personal matter and considers that people should be free to choose their religious values. The interviewees of this research who are strongly driven by this subjectivity, being mainly secular and belonging to the intellectual classes, do not reject or deny religion and some even have religious tendencies. They reject, however, the idea that a religious identity should have any public or political relevance; more generally they stand against the idea that any given identity should give the individual a privileged position.

To fully grasp the four subjectivities explored so far it is necessary to examine not only what they adhere to but equally what they are against, as sometimes the latter (what they are opposed to or reject) is so strong that it should be considered as a defining or constitutive feature of a subjectivity, one almost as important as what they positively embrace. Indeed, in the two-dimensional framework of this study the four main subjectivities that have been identified are defined as a result of both the positive interplay between two subjective determinations and the

negative interplay of other determinations. An Islamist subjectivity, for instance, can be marked by a strong opposition to an emancipatory subjectivity and above all to anything to do with equality, particularly emancipatory modernity and feminism.

Likewise, an emancipatory subjectivity, or rather the presence of significant emancipatory aspects and tendencies, implies a radical rejection of above all an Islamist subjectivity, but also of traditionalist subjectivities and of a subjectivity of desire for the West. Since religion in Iran is intertwined with and is a part of the regime, it is more likely that alienation from the state would result in alienation from the religion. It is this opposition to the state form of Islamism that makes egalitarian movements in Iran unique in Muslim contexts. Shahnaz, for instance, who is a pioneer of women's rights activism in Iran can to a significant extent be said to be a product of such an opposition. To manifest her objection against using hijab, censorship and oppression of women, she has chosen writing and publishing books: "my weapon is my pen". These and other women's writings, as Mahtab claimed, have been very influential in the formation of younger generations of women's rights activists and feminists that "have spread the language of equality among the society".

The Islamist subjectivity and the subjectivity of desire for the West are in a mutually antagonistic embrace. Their relationship thus involves a simultaneous mutual attraction and repulsion, as they do not seem to be able to live and indeed survive without each other. On the one hand there is the Islamist subjectivity which combines an outright and even aggressive rejection of what comes from the West with a silent adherence in actual conduct to certain aspects of capitalist modernity, above all modern technology as well as modern commodities and cultural consumption (e.g. cinema). We have here a typical phenomenon of denial of what one secretly desires, a phenomenon which, as pointed out in the previous section, has also been categorised as *reactionary modernity*. It can thus be seen that the fascination for the West or for capitalist modernity is not only positively at the core of the subjectivity of desire for the West, but also the disavowed kernel of the Islamist subjectivity, which is traversed by it from top to bottom.

On the other hand, there is the opposition of the subjectivity of desire for the West to the Islamist subjectivity. Given that, as explained above, the subjectivity of desire for the West is mainly about getting on with one's life with a minimum level of involvement in any open conflicts (e.g. those involved in power politics, which may affect everyday life), and struggles (e.g. those

involved in challenging inequality). Thus, this subjectivity is about living a safe life, better employment, establishing one's business and generally one's financial success, all aspirations which require a state which is capable of providing people with employment as well as advanced technology. And yet, women driven by this subjectivity do not support the state's approaches the way women who are carriers of an Islamist subjectivity do, although they do not question the hierarchy in the state and patriarchy in society. As long as the state continues to, at least in part, provide the advantages of modernity as far as living a comfortable and secure life is concerned (education, technological requirement and so on), they can live within the state frameworks without any fundamental objection.

As to the opposition between the Islamist and traditional subjectivities, the Islamist subjectivity presents a rather weaker and more subtle opposition to the traditionalist subjectivities than it does to the other two subjectivities. The fact that the both subjectivities emphasise the motherhood and wifeness roles of women offers a certain level of similarities or a certain common ground between these two subjectivities. Despite these similarities, the Islamist subjectivity involves a rather different view of what a Muslim woman must be, namely, a modern woman (and so a modern mother and/or wife), but modern in accordance with Muslim and Iranian traditions as interpreted by the state, and in no way modern in a Western sense. That woman may also participate, contrary to older generations of women, in public and political life. This difference between Islamist and traditionalist subjectivities is crucial and generally overlooked in the literature. Its fundamental importance can be understood by the fact that an Islamist subjectivity favours a woman who is not silent or submissive, but has a voice that she should use to support the Islamic regime. In addition, such woman prioritises, or should prioritise, submission to a male religious leader, which may imply challenging the traditional patriarchy (fathers and husbands).

The evidence for this was seen in the participants of this research who are carriers of an Islamist subjectivity and who are in addition university graduates, but do not believe, despite being very religious, in the superiority of men over women. They participated in the Revolution without seeing themselves obliged to obtain permission from their fathers; they are still involved in different forms of socio-political activities in supporting the state. In spite of their stress on motherhood roles, these women clearly tried to distinguish themselves from what they see as a traditional 'backward' view and pointed to their higher level of education, their professional

activity and their involvement in public and political activities. This opposition between Islamist and traditionalist subjectivities, although by no means as bitter and sharp as the hostility that Islamist women expressed towards feminists, nevertheless reveals their strong sense of superiority over the women who follow the traditional lifestyle.

Although women driven by Islamist and traditionalist subjectivities tend to maintain and support what they understand as traditions, particularly those related to religious values, there is a difference in the level of engagement they maintain with the outside world in order to maintain those values. A fundamental aspect of an Islamist subjectivity is about spreading the ideology of Islam (perhaps we should say of 'Islamism's Islam') at a national and even international level, whereas the traditionalist subjectivities would engage the world at a very different level and in a very different, less assertive and non-aggressive, manner. Thus, many of the women who are strongly driven by an Islamist subjectivity among our interviewees try to push the state's political agenda abroad through sometimes militant approaches whereas those who are carriers of a traditionalist subjectivity are at most involved in charitable activities that would influence people in a rather local or regional scale.

Moreover, carriers of Islamist subjectivity acknowledge a more malleable version of Islam whereas for the traditionalist subjectivities none of the aspects of religion as they understand it is negotiable. The Islamist subjectivity carries with it its own innovative traditions and new sets of rules which are based on its own understanding of religion and obviously create new forms of domination and subordination. Traditionalist subjectivities are about following a version of Islam which is considered as sacred and fixed; so it cannot be changed, even if change were to make the situation more favourable for women. They reject the novelties that Islamist subjectivity introduces into religious practices. For many women from working class families who are strongly driven by traditionalist subjectivities, a woman does not have a voice, nor does she involve herself in political arenas, not even to defend Islam. This view constitutes the ground for the opposition between traditionalist and emancipatory subjectivities, as the latter is essential about changes which advance women's status in society in an egalitarian direction and the former reject, as said, in principle any kind of reform. To a woman like Zaynab, for instance, concepts such as women's rights or equality are not relevant and she submits to patriarchy as the only 'correct' way of life according to Islamic law.

Another form of rejection to consider is that involved in the relation of a subjectivity of desire for the West and traditionalist subjectivities. It has been discussed so far that a desire for capitalist modernity implies the rejection of the traditional view that accepts the confinement of women to the domestic, private sphere. Looking mostly at Western models for their lifestyle, women driven by a subjectivity of desire for the West are not inspired by Fatima, Zaynab (the daughter and granddaughter of Muhammad) or the ancient Iranian Goddesses as role models, nor do they want to live their lives the way their mothers and grandmothers lived. They often entertain a dual feeling of compassion and superiority towards the women of the past who lived without the help of modern facilities and devoted their lives to their children. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers these women do not see themselves obliged to fulfil wifhood or motherhood roles. It cannot, however, be said that this subjectivity is in full denial of traditional values. For many women in Iran a departure from religion and closeness to the ‘cultured’ West takes place through an emphasis on their national identities and the ‘magnificent’ pre-Islamic Iranian civilisation.

The traditionalist subjectivities for their parts reject capitalist modernity if it is in conflict with traditional moralities or with ‘what God says’. For instance, two of the participants of this research, being in need for an income themselves, manifested themselves against working in places where Islamic codes are not implemented or their families would not approve of. This aspect of traditionalist subjectivities, i.e. the tendency to reinforce and preserve the bonds based on lineage, religion, ethnicity and so on, involves a strong opposition to the egoistic individualism that the subjectivity of desire for the West entertains and promotes. This is evident in the case of some of the participants of this research who were born and raised in marginalised remote areas and thus were less influenced by the dynamics of capitalist modernity, Islamism and emancipation and instead were under the control of traditional culture (giving up school and getting married at a young age). Being moved to large cities such as Tehran and mixing with the urban industrialised environment of these cities, these women may entertain a strong desire for a new set of values (higher education and employment) for their daughters – values which are different from those they were brought up with.

Regarding the opposition between the subjectivity of desire for the West and an emancipatory subjectivity, we can state that the participants of this research who are strongly driven by a subjectivity of desire for the West expressed a lack of concern towards other women’s

issues or the movements that promote equality. Thus unlike those interviewees who are carriers of an Islamist subjectivity and openly expressed their hostility towards feminism, these women expressed a lower level of opposition and even often used the language of rights promoted by feminists. Many of the women driven by this subjectivity, being educated and having higher levels of social interactions, have had the opportunity to know about their rights and concepts such as feminism and equality which may lead them to even praise feminists for defending women's rights.

On the other hand, there is a clear opposition between emancipation (basically in the form of emancipatory aspects and elements one way or another related to a desire to seek equality in society) and the subjectivities that contain or involve pro-capitalist aspects. Even though none of the participants of this research explicitly spoke against capitalism or consumerism, the emergence of leftist and Marxist elements among women's rights activists in recent years might be a manifestation of such an opposition. These women's rights activists (including two participants of this study) criticised the approaches that women's rights activists used about a decade ago.

Such approaches, which were more common during the presidency of Khatami, included direct political-legal confrontations with the state to challenge the discriminatory laws, seeking more women friendly interpretations of the Sharia law and changes in laws such as the right to children's custody, inheritance, a woman's right to divorce. The newer generations of women's rights activists, who call themselves 'leftist' or 'Marxist' feminists, believe that such strategies neglect the issues of women from working class families and are instead focused on women's issues such as compulsory hijab which they consider as less important. These women try instead to challenge the patriarchy at its grassroots and put their focus on women from the lower strata with a view to increase their awareness about matters such as domestic violence, effective communication, social interaction and economic independence.

Taken together, the analysis of the four main subjectivities that have been identified in this study suggests that, first of all, women who are carriers of a subjectivity of desire for the West and those who carry traditionalist subjectivities tend to conduct their lives on an individualistic basis so that what these women stand for is either related to their personal/professional lives or their local communities. Whether looking for their individual wealth or their spiritual wellbeing, these women do not generally view the world outside their own agenda. Second, the Islamist and emancipatory subjectivities lead women to establish bonds with other like-minded women on the

basis of their shared political ideologies rather than as a result of growing up under similar local culture or working in the same work place.

Women's rights activists, for instance, collaborate with each other not only in striving for women's rights, which is their defining feature, but also in their rejection of the Islamist subjectivity. Carriers of the latter are likewise linked to one another in their rejection of feminism. Thus, generally both Islamist and emancipatory subjectivities may not infrequently be led to take a (sometimes militant) attitude to change the society. Women driven by Islamist and emancipatory subjectivities are generally in minority compared to women driven by the other two subjectivities. And yet it can safely be surmised that the main engine for change in society stems as much from Islamist and emancipatory struggles as from the profound mutual rejection and conflicts between the carriers of these two subjective forms (Islamist and emancipatory).



## **Chapter 8: Women's emancipation in Iran: Main findings and conclusions**

### **Main findings and limitations**

The current thesis consisted of two parts. In the first part, a review of the literature provided us with a theoretical and empirical overview of women's status in Muslim societies, particularly in the Middle East, in relation to the dynamics of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation and the possibilities there may be for Muslim women to advance towards emancipation. The following are the most significant findings:

Part I started with challenging the simplistic (but prominent and rather entrenched) debate (or pseudo-debate) as to whether Islam is women's friend or women's foe, so that, e.g. the heavy patriarchy existing in Muslim countries is attributed either almost exclusively to Islam or almost exclusively to previous tribal structures. It pointed to the fact that such way of framing the problem is symptomatic of the complicities between capitalist modernisation, for which Islam is obviously women's foe, and Islamisation, for which Islam is practically the solution to everything, and nefarious from the point of view of women's emancipation. It also identified that Islam is not a static entity, but a dynamic force which has undergone changes throughout history, always in interplay with other forces.

Two important aspects of the dynamics of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation processes in Muslims contexts were identified. The first is a selective opposition between these two processes to be understood as choosing aspects from each other which are beneficial and rejecting the rest. Modernisation in the Middle East, particularly in its dominant capitalist variety, has been mainly practiced at an institutional level and failed to involve people's deeper levels of conduct. This rapid pace of social change mainly in the visual aspects of people's lives in the Muslim world, has encompassed an identity conflict within the Muslim societies in a sense that it has made them closer to Islam than before. Islamisation processes for their part have not rejected modernity as a whole and may welcome modern technology, tools and methodologies for their own purpose.

The second crucial aspect of the modernisation and Islamisation processes according to the current literature is that the two forces constantly try to keep their distance from what is considered traditional. Neither of these forces, for instance, appreciates the idea of a passive woman confined

to the private sphere. While women's active presence in public and political arenas, veiled or unveiled, is forbidden in accordance with a traditional patriarchal position, both modernisation and Islamisation forces encourage women to occupy the public sphere. Islamist groups, for instance, in need of a support as well as legitimisation, encourage women to be involved in public and political activities, while continuing to raise the next generations. This was particularly evident in the case of many female members of Islamist groups throughout the Middle East who were educated and professional.

The literature has also shown that in the dynamics of capitalist modernisation and Islamisation processes, women's bodies have always been used as a site of struggle. This conflict over women's bodies is particularly manifested in the debates involving the veil. Thus, removing a piece of cloth from women's head embodies the idea of women's liberation, or at least the beginning thereof, for the imperialist West, while covering a woman's body with that cloth becomes a symbol of resistance and women's agency. Women are encouraged to get education, participate in economic developments and vote for and support the political parties; however, little of this can be said to challenge patriarchy and thus open emancipatory pathways for women. This once again shows the complicities between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation and the dead-end situation this implies for any advancement of women in terms of emancipation.

The existing literature has generally situated women's subjectivities and their collective actions in the Middle East in the midst of the struggles between the two forces: the emergence of feminism as a part of modernisation projects brought about sharp divisions among women, which is not necessarily a negative development from the standpoint of emancipation. We thus find, on the one hand, secular feminists and women's rights scholars mainly from the intellectual classes, often supported by the modernist states or international organisations, and, on the other, the emergence of female members of Islamist groups as a counter reaction to what they see as 'Westernised' and 'foreign' female or feminist agendas. Despite their opposition to feminism, it is remarkable, and often overlooked, that the approaches Islamist women have been using to improve their positions within Islamist groups are largely borrowed from feminist discourses. The arrival of Islamic feminism characterises women's struggles as an attempt to reconcile religion and feminism and achieve a more female friendly reading of Islam. Despite the efforts to introduce

Islamic feminism as a more acceptable and justifiable version of feminism, some scholars still label it as Western and foreign.

In Iran, the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 – seen as the demonstration of a strong opposition between triumphant Islamism and Western modernity and a weaker opposition between Islamism and traditionalism – provided the grounds for the formation of a rather new, even unprecedented subjectivity in women: a Muslim revolutionary female subjectivity as a rejection of the Westernised image of women as well as of the traditional silent type of woman who existed in Iranian society for centuries. It is this new form of subjectivity that, as stressed in some studies, generated new emancipatory possibilities for Iranian women in the first decade after the Revolution and particularly during the Iran-Iraq War. After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the end of the War with Iraq and consequently the liberalisation of the markets, some women from ruling-class strata started criticizing the restrictive gender policies. This new trend, together with an abundance of the NGOs and publications on women extended the feminist discourse in society and provided the basis for the arrival of Islamic feminism and a limited modification of the state's sharia-based gender regulations.

Although the review of existing literature in Part I provided us with a good initial theoretical basis for understanding women's position in Iran, it also led to identification of a number of gaps and inadequacies in the literature that I sought to address in the field work of this study. The initial analysis of the in-depth interviews with twenty-two Iranian women from different backgrounds in Tehran, showed that women's position in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world is much more complicated than usually assumed in the literature and can by no means be adequately grasped through the dynamics involved in the interplay between capitalist globalisation and Islamisation processes. The main weaknesses in the literature can be listed as follows:

First, the model based on the opposition between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation fails to appreciate the other forces at play in women's struggles and movements, in particular the existence of emancipatory tendencies. The existing studies on the Iranian Revolution, for instance, see it as an (Islamic) movement against modernity and tend to overlook the quests for equality, justice and liberation as a major driving force during the Revolution. Likewise, the re-emergence of women's right movements in post-revolution times have more to do with raising objections

against restrictive readings of Islam and sharia-based gender policies than with striving for gender equality. As much as they focus on increasing Islamisation in the Middle East, the narratives on Islamic organisations fail to explain that after the failure of secularist organisations or states in improving people's living condition, Islamists became popular through promising 'justice' and 'liberation'. These studies fail to establish any relation between women's involvement in Islamist groups and their fascination for Islamised ideas of liberation, and women's frustration with modernist secular feminist agendas.

Second, there are practically no studies specifically focused on, or giving prominence to, women's subjectivities, a crucial issue from the standpoint of women's emancipation. Directly related to this is the fact that identity figures very prominently in the literature as a major topic of study. However, identity, contrary to what most of these studies' explicit aims, tends to immediately shift the problem and the debate towards identitarian (above all religious and national) politics which as a rule are contrary to emancipation. Among the few studies that examine women's subjectivities, this issue is often studied in parallel with a rather narrow notion of agency and tends to be confined to middle-class educated and professional women who have joined feminist or Islamist groups. There is thus clearly a lack of research on non-activist women as well as on women from other social classes. There is particularly a serious lack of research on working-class and peasant Muslim women, those who do not have enough money to exit home or get educated and might even work harder than men. Rather than being seen as individuals and subjects, these women are neglected in the literature or considered as objects who are manipulated by Islamism or capitalist modernity.

This issue can particularly be seen in narratives on hijab which mainly reflect the views of opponents and partisans of veiling; thus the debate is strongly framed in binary terms: either veiling is rejected as a means of oppression or it is advocated as a symbol of resistance and Muslim women's agency. De-veiling and re-veiling are also discussed in the current literature as a means by which modernisation and Islamisation processes have tried to dominate public spaces. It was, for instance, discussed how women participate in universities, cinemas, beaches and political arenas with or without veil, and how this can be a symbol of modernity or of Muslim identity. What is mainly missed in this type of studies is the views of working-class women on hijab. For a working-class woman in Iran, for instance, chador might have a rather different meaning or

purpose than it has for Islamist women, and that meaning is not necessarily entirely religious. The current literature does reflect the views of the women who wear chador as a matter of functionality – a prevention from street harassment for instance – rather than an expression of their Muslim identity.

These weaknesses in the literature as well as the relative inadequacy of a framework too reliant on the opposition between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation, even if the literature review never treated this opposition as a binary one between two external forces confronting each other, led me to conceive the field study on the basis of a reconfigured theoretical framework in which the play of forces is made more complex and comprehensive through the articulation of two major oppositions: that between capitalism and emancipation, which can be portrayed as the horizontal dimension in a two-dimensional diagram, and that between modernity and tradition, which constitutes the vertical dimension.

In this way the opposition between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation is definitely displaced from the central stage and treated as a false opposition, since not only are both forces contrary to emancipation and work particularly against the emancipation of women, but their very conflicts and – as has been emphasised before – complicities, obfuscate and divert women's aspirations and struggles for emancipation. I consider this relegation of the opposition between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation to a secondary status and its conceptualisation as the very nemesis of emancipation in general and the emancipation of women in particular as a fundamental result of the current research. But beyond this, perhaps the most important result of this study lies precisely in the capacity of its two-dimensional framework to portray the subjective field in terms of both, its structure, and its complex dynamics.

The analysis of the interviews with Iranian women in Tehran allowed me to identify four main subjectivities and to conceptualise them as the result of the conflicting, tension-ridden interplay between the four subjective determinations defined in the framework of this thesis: capitalism, emancipation, tradition and modernity. Those are the four subjectivities:

*Islamist* subjectivity, which is the result of the interplay between capitalism and tradition/religion. It represents a strong tendency towards promoting Shia values which constitutes the ideological basis of the state in Iran and seeking power using religion (and other forms of

tradition) as an instrument. But constitutive of the Islamist subjectivity is also a strong rejection of any form of emancipation and of what I have called emancipatory modernity. This subjectivity is, together with the subjectivity of desire for the West, the most distinctive subjective form that can be found in Iran: women carriers of this subjectivity generally support the regime's anti-West agenda, reject feminism and endorse the state's ideal of womanhood. Mainly coming from middle and lower-class families, a majority of these women benefit from state support or currently belong to the ruling- and upper-classes through.

*Subjectivity of desire for the West*, which is the result of the interaction between modernity and capitalism, an interaction which sees modernity subordinated to capitalism. It implies a strong desire for consumerism, the adoption of Western ways of life, a sense of satisfaction about living in modern times and competition with the others over material resources. What this subjectivity is opposed to and rejects is the traditionalist subjectivities, as these involve a strong attachment to one's own tribe or social group which contrasts with the individualism pervading a subjectivity of desire for the West, and the Islamist subjectivity. In a similar way to an Islamist subjectivity, this subjective form is rather distinct in Iranian society. Women strongly driven by this subjectivity, mainly from upper and middle-class families, are aware of their rights, demand an equal share in the labour and financial market and yet don't normally have a desire to fight for women's rights beyond actual access to the existing capitalist conditions, let alone for equality in general.

*Traditionalist* subjectivities, which emerge out of the interaction between tradition-religion and emancipation, are rather varied and often less distinct than the subjectivity of desire for the West and the Islamist subjectivity. The traditionalist subjectivities involve a strong desire in women to submit to, follow, support and promote most forms of tradition (particularly in connection with nationalist and religious values). Unlike an Islamist subjectivity which is pervaded by a quest for power which relies on religious values, traditionalist subjectivities tend to be particularly concerned with avoiding 'sins' and 'ungodly' thoughts, adhering to chastity, morality and honour, and defending national identity.

These aspects of the traditionalist subjectivities put them in quite a radical contrast with that feature of the subjectivity of desire for the West which drives women to pursue a more successful life and be almost exclusively focused on their personal accomplishments. Women carriers of these traditionalist subjectivities who are from a middle-class background normally

have some familiarity with modern concepts such as women's rights and feminism; they reject feminism mainly from a religious point of view and instead devote themselves to charitable and compassionate actions. Women from working-class families on the other hand have less or no familiarity with women's rights or other egalitarian concepts and are more likely to accept patriarchy, be 'obedient' wives and 'good' mothers and prioritise their families.

*Emancipatory* subjectivity is the result of the interplay between emancipation and modernity, and thus involves a form of modernity radically opposite to capitalist modernity. However, rather than full-fledged emancipatory subjectivities, what I empirically found was the presence of different emancipatory aspects or components one way or another related to equality as a value to be striven for. Women driven by emancipatory determinations tend to be educated and belong to the intellectual classes conceived of in a broad sense, and many of them are in fact women's rights activists. Although women here are to different extents carriers of emancipatory convictions about equality, gender or just human equality, under the current socio-political environment in Iran it is difficult, firstly, to maintain those convictions without being discouraged, and secondly, to deploy them by way of different forms of action and activism. These difficulties came out very prominently in our interviews with women who clearly had emancipatory aspirations and even participated in different forms of activism. Thus, these emancipatory tendencies and elements may only rarely come to constitute a very distinct subjective form or, even less so, crystallise in the form of movements or organised politics.

In addition to allowing us to identify and conceptualise those four subjectivities, the two-dimensional framework of this thesis can be applied both at a given historical moment and to analyses of historical sequences. It can thus be used to analyse historical changes in women's subjective field, but it can also be of invaluable help in examining changes in larger contexts. It can analyse in detail, for instance, how after the establishment of a new state in Iran the emancipatory elements that constituted a fundamental core of the Revolution gradually faded away. Many people who demanded justice, freedom and equality during the uprising eventually achieved a position of power in the state or conversely were alienated and gravitated towards the subjectivity of desire for the West.

Although this research was carefully prepared and it has largely met its aims, there were a number of unavoidable limitations and shortcomings. First of all, due to budget, the time limit and

feasibility this research was conducted only on the sample population who live in Tehran or cities near it. It would have enhanced the research if women from other backgrounds such as Kurdish, Turkish and Balouch women had been interviewed. Due to the distance between cities in a large country like Iran, this was impossible as travelling to either of these areas could take long hours or needed an extra budget for flight tickets. It may also have provided more insights if more women with state positions had been interviewed. However, due to the sensitivity of the issues such as feminism and women's rights, access to such women was difficult and limited.

Second, since the analysis of the interviews has been done through the interviewer's personal judgment, or subjective lens, it is unavoidable that a degree of bias may occur. First of all, the possibility of bias exists in the interviewer's evaluation of the body language, facial expressions and style of dress of each participant. To try and control this issue a deliberate attempt was undertaken to suspend first impressions and judgments and instead evaluate each candidate based on the overall conclusions of her interview. Secondly, since translation is also an interpretive act, a part of what the participants intended may have been lost due to the translation from Farsi to English. There were particularly phrases and idioms in Farsi that could hardly be rendered in English, except through complicated paraphrases, which certainly makes the processes of interview analysis more complex and at times perhaps less clear.

The researcher's shared cultural and/or gender identity with the interviewees could be considered as another source of bias though influencing the interview dynamics. The reason is that the participants' primary assumptions and their interpretations of the questions could have been different, at least in part, with an interviewer from a different nationality, class, culture or gender. As was explained in chapter six, the interviews were designed so as to minimise the effect of these forms of bias. As said above, a conscious and deliberate effort was systematically done in order to ask questions in a 'natural' and sensitive manner, trying to keep to this demeanour even when dealing with possible misunderstandings, disagreements or tensions.

Third, the findings of this study are restricted to interviews and thus not contrasted with other possible sources of information. Further informal conversations with the participants or observing them in their everyday lives could have been used to supplement their interview statements and thus have a more comprehensive and robust result – an approach which could be



extended to an analysis of the participants' publications or writings, when relevant, and even of their social media engagement.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of the present research was to examine women's status and struggles for equality and emancipation in Iran, but with reference to other Muslim societies, particularly in the Middle East, and to explore, on the basis of that analysis, the prospects for the emancipation of women and, more generally, given that those prospects are absolutely crucial for achieving broader progressive social changes, the prospects for broader emancipatory transformations. Although not suggesting a blueprint for fixing women's issues, the findings of this research provide us with a rather concrete understanding of the process and dynamics involved in the subjective field, particularly in what concerns women's subjectivities and struggles. This understanding can of course be the basis for further research at an academic level, but it can also provide orientation at the practical and political level. The following conclusions and practical implications can be drawn from the present study:

This study has, first of all, shown the necessity of radically deconstructing, critiquing and rejecting the simplistic debate as to whether Islam is women's friend or women's foe, since such way of framing the problem is symptomatic of the complicities between capitalist modernisation and Islamisation and nefarious from the point of view of women's emancipation. Instead of seeing women as objects who are constantly positioned by external forces such as religion, state, market, feminist agendas and so on, the current research also helps us considering women as main actors in shaping social dynamics and formulating their own.

The results of this study suggest that women's issues and struggles, contrary to what is common in the literature, should be analysed outside the binary opposition between capitalist modernisation (and this includes most forms of Western liberal feminism) and Islamisation. Instead equality should be considered as a central diagnostic criterion and as a crucial issue to be studied when considered women's movements and struggles. It is only through seeing each other outside their corresponding identities that women can come together as *one voice*. This understanding can constitute a major basis for women's rights activism and struggles and, beyond that, can also be expanded to any political movement with some emancipatory dimension in Iran.

With sharia at the core of the Iranian state, the political ideologies whose main focus is de-linking Islam from the state generally lead to a strong resistance from the state and consequently a failure. The capitalism-emancipation opposition that was identified as the main relevant opposition in women's activism in Iran may be applied to other Muslim contexts elsewhere in the world. It can, for instance, provide a framework for the exploration of dynamics within the Islamist militant groups and shift the main focus from their religious agendas to their position towards the capitalism-emancipation opposition.

The findings of this research also provide insights for examining the different forms that traditionalism takes and how they can side in specific circumstances in favour of emancipation. While in the literature on women religion is normally seen (except in the case of contemporary Islamism, which is rightly seen as a modern, non-traditional phenomenon) as the only form of tradition, the present study highlights other aspects of traditionalism in its cultural and national manifestations, and suggests that some of them may, in specific circumstances, be compatible with women's emancipation, or may even evolve from traditionalist to emancipatory positions.

In truth the question of equality, which is at the heart and the fundamental basis of an emancipatory subjectivity, does not feature in any prominent way, as we have seen in this thesis, in the subjective field. Even in the case of the emancipatory subjectivities, or rather emancipatory aspects and tendencies, that have been identified in this research, equality was only rarely considered in full. Thus, it practically never includes any concern with Iranian Kurdish women or with Iranian Arab and Balouch women, and none of the women interviewed in the current study, including those who considered themselves as activists, showed any concern about the situation of these women in Iran. However, the situation of these (Iranian Kurdish, Arab and Balouch) women is one of heavy discrimination, as this is practiced not only by the state and the media, but also by other people, including what is often called ordinary people and ordinary women – a list to which we should perhaps add the fact that they are also neglected in the literature and in research.

There is thus clearly a need to study the situation of women from minorities in Muslim countries and to include these women in future studies, which may well involve a certain re-orientation of the varied fields of study concerned with women and gender in Muslim countries. This thesis, I believe, is a contribution towards such a task by, first of all, focusing on emancipation and therefore on equality as providing the true opposition to capitalist modernisation, Islamisation

and traditionalism, and, last but by no means least, providing a theoretically grounded tool for the analysis and diagnosis of the subjective field, and thus for exploring the possibilities and prospects of women and ultimately human emancipation.

The need to take into account non-activist women who often constitute the majority of women in Iran and elsewhere also comes out as a major aspect of this research. Indeed, the current research suggests that the prospect for women's emancipation in Iran (but probably elsewhere as well) are in a very significant way to be looked at by analysing the situation, aspirations and desires of this 'non-active' majority, and how the latter can evolve towards more politically engaged positions in an emancipatory direction. This would in addition imply to move research from an almost exclusive focus on educated middle-class women and what have been called in very broad terms the intellectual classes to working-class and less-educated women whose way of expression does not fit, surely not as well as middle-class women do, the typical research instruments based on questionnaires and interviews (not to mention prominent presence in the press and the written medium). It is only by including these women through denser ethnographic studies which can grasp their hopes, desires and aspirations that research can gain a much more grounded understanding of the prospects of women's emancipation in Iran and elsewhere.

## Appendix 1 – A Summary of the Interviewees

Names (all pseudonyms)	Age	Education	Occupation	Religious Affiliation
Mahin	66	Post diploma	Retired school principal	Religious
Bitia	28	BA	House wife	Secular
Sarah	35	BA	Engineer	Secular
Mona	33	BA	Government Employee	Secular
Samira	28	Post-diploma	Office Administrator	Religious
Maryam	45	Ms	High School consultant	Religious
Zahra	46	Diploma	School Cleaner	Religious
Foroogh	46	BA	High School Teacher	Secular
Soori	28	Ms	PhD Student	Secular
Molood	55	BA	Publisher of a women's magazine	Secular
Pooran	56	BA in sociology	Media(producer)- NGO(organiser)	Religious
Azam	56	Ms in sociology	Media	Religious
Golnar	35	BA in environmental science	Journalist	Secular
Nazanin	39	Ms in Management and Planning	Specialist in women's empowerment (works for development projects)	Secular
Shahnaz	73	BA in sociology	Publisher	Secular
Mahtab	30	BA in sociology	Journalist/researcher	Secular
Shiva	31	Ms in sociology	Freelance researcher	Secular

Badri	63	Ms in international relations	Founder of an Islamic women's Foundation	Religious
Zaynab	61	Secondary school	Street seller	Religious
Fatima	40	Secondary school	House wife	Religious
Ozra	32	Primary school	House wife	Religious
Roghieh	38	Illiterate	House wife	Religious

## Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

### Women’s agency in their everyday life

<b>DAILY PRACTICES</b>	What they normally do	How this compare: Moms-grand moms did, daughters will do	What they’d like to do (or how satisfied they are)	How willing to change; to do ‘what’ to change
Ordinary days				
Festive or non-ord. days				
Outside domestic domain				

### Especially relevant practices

<b>ESPECIALLY RELEVANT PRACTICES</b>	What they normally do	How this compare: Moms-gr moms did, daughters will do	What they’d like to do (or how satisfied they are)	How willing to change; to do ‘what’ to change
Veiling				
Praying-religion				

### Political practices (this is mainly about *participation* in political activities)

<b>POLITICAL PRACTICES</b>	Participate(d)? How?	How this compare: Moms-grand moms did, daughters may do	How satisfied with what they did/do	How willing to participate in future
Revolution				
NGOs				
Movements				

### **Appendix 3 – A list of interviewees in an alphabetical order**

#### *Azam*

Azam is a well-educated middle-class woman in her late fifties. She is suggested for an interview by Pooran who is another participant of this study and she in turn introduced Badri for the interview. Azam is the manager of a website for women for which she has several employees. The interview with Azam took place in Azam's large office located in a busy area of city centre. Azam has participated in the Islamic Revolution and is very fond of Ayatollah Khomeini. She is also a supporter of the state and the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. She is strongly against feminism.

#### *Badri*

Badri is a middle-class, educated woman in her early sixties who is Islamist conservative but of the Principlist line. She has had several state positions in women's affairs in Ahmadinejad's Principlist government, but currently has none in Mr. Rouhani's moderate cabinet. Badri is currently a member of a well-known Islamist all-female association. The interview with Badri took place in the office of the same association where other Islamist women were present. Badri and all other women in the association were wearing black chadors. Although Badri was introduced for interview by Azam and they presumably have enough in common to have some friendly relations, she is more conservative than Azam and presents a stronger anti-West sentiment.

#### *Bitā*

Bitā is twenty eight years old, married, educated, and middle-class with a strong ability, so she believes, to distinguish what is 'good' and what is 'bad' for her. She does not have a job or children. Bitā looks trendy, puts on makeup and did not cover her hair in the house party where the interview took place.

#### *Fatima*

Fatima is forty years old and has secondary school education. She was born and raised in a small town in north east Iran near the border with Turkmenistan and currently is living in Tehran. Fatima is a housewife who has two daughters. Her husband is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War with a

permanent mental condition as a result of the War which makes him violent towards his families sometimes. The interview with Fatima took place in a charity when she, Ozra and Roghieh were participating in a training course for women. The charity is located in a poor area in Tehran and supports women and children from poor families.

### *Foroogh*

Foroogh is forty five years old, educated, and although coming from a working-class family, she currently belongs to middle-class strata. Being a high school teacher she has concerns about women's rights and gender equality in Iran. She is divorced and has a daughter. The interview with her took place in a café in a rather poor area in South Tehran where she works and lives.

### *Golnar*

Golnar, thirty four years old, is middle-class, educated and secular. She is single and works as a journalist in a famous secular newspaper. Although she is not a women's rights activist nor does she call herself a feminist, in the past she has participated in the gatherings to object to preventions on women's presence in the sports stadiums.

### *Mahin*

Mahin, sixty five years old, is a religious, middle-class woman. She is an active member of a charity that provides deprived single mothers with trainings and financial help. Having an active social life and being in touch with different people through her wide social network, she regularly contributes to different social events at her local neighbourhood and attends religious ceremonies in a local mosque where she meets plenty of other religious women (and men) every day.

### *Mahtab*

Mahtab is thirty years old, middle-class and educated. She is a "leftist feminist" (or so she considers herself) who has participated in different women's rights activities (campaigns, gatherings, meetings etc.) and writes about gender issues for various women's magazines including the magazine that Molood is a chief editor in. Mahtab refers to Molood and Shahnaz as "inspirational women".

### *Maryam*



Maryam is forty five years old, married, educated, middle-class and religious. She is a counsellor in an all-girl high school where she provides counselling sessions and mental health support for students.

#### *Molood*

Molood is fifty years old, middle-class and educated. In several academic studies she is referred to as a pro-Islamic feminism and one of the pioneers of women's rights movement in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. She has spent some time in prison for women's rights activities that she undertook in the past. The interview with Molood took place in her office.

#### *Mona*

Mona is thirty five years old, married, educated and middle-class. She works as an accountant in the public sector (employed by the government). Mona is a friend of Sarah and was interviewed at the same place with Sarah. At the time when the interview was taking place, Mona's fiancé did not let her answering the questions at a 'private' place (another room) and asked to be present while Mona was interviewed.

#### *Nazanin*

Nazanin is educated, middle class and in her late thirties. She is a part of an emerging wave of professional women in their thirties who are single, have good jobs and all in all enjoy a successful professional career. She is an independent women's rights activist, which means that she does not make any references to either Islamist women or feminists; nor does she support any particular political groups (Reformists, conservatives etc.). She works for an international development project and meanwhile she does voluntary activities in relation to women's empowerment.

#### *Ozra*

Ozara is thirty two years old and has primary school education. She is married and has one daughter. She was born in small remote town where no high school education was provided for her and as a result she left school at a young age and got married. The interview with Ozra took place at the same charity that Fatima and Roghieh were present. The interview with her was rather

short as she was not familiar with some contexts. For example she did not answer questions regarding the Islamic Revolution, women's rights activism and NGOs.

### *Pooran*

Pooran is a religious middle-class and educated women's rights activist in her late fifties. Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in which she actively participated, her profession and main activities have all been directly related to women and solving women's issues (mainly legal, economic and educational) at the national and policy making level. She tries to address women's issues at the state level, mainly by challenging the government and the parliament to change the laws in favour of women. She, for instance, produces TV programs that are about women and manages women's social networks whose members are mainly from the political elite.

### *Roghieh*

Roghieh is thirty years old and illiterate. She is married and has two daughters. She was born and raised in a small village in West Iran and currently lives in Tehran in a poor area. The interview with her which took place in a charity was rather short as she was not familiar with some contexts. When she was asked about the level of her education she did not know what 'education' meant.

### *Samira*

Samira, twenty eight years old, is a relatively religious, somewhat educated middle class woman. Working in the office of a local magazine, she is struggling to make enough money to live on.

### *Sarah*

Sarah, thirty five years old, is an educated, middle class woman who has a highly paid job. The interview took place in her trendy house. She runs a successful business beside her job. The fact that she is not financially reliant on her husband (and seemingly she has more income than him) gives her a sort of self-assurance that forms the basis for many of her responses.

### *Shahnaz*

Shahnaz, seventy four years old and married, is a secular middle class and educated woman and a well-known women's rights scholar. Having written, translated and published several books on

women's issues and gender roles in Iran and despite being secular, Shahnaz defends women's traditional status in families.

### *Shiva*

Shiva is thirty years old, educated and middle-class. She is a feminist and a women's rights activist with a great enthusiasm for writing and doing research on concepts such as feminism which she believes are still new to Iranian society. Shiva's difference with all other participants of this research is her good understanding and capacity for analysis, which, together with her deep knowledge on the current and historical socio-political issues, make her capable of examining causes, actors and the dynamics of current social and political conflicts.

### *Soori*

Soori is a PhD student, single and in her late twenties. In a similar way to many urban middle class women of her age, Soori has a fashionable appearance and spends a considerable time on social media to be in touch with other people. She is also a follower of some of the most recent social trends among young middle class women.

### *Zahra*

Zahra, forty five years old, is a religious working class woman who is high school graduate and works as a school cleaner. Having lost her husband at a young age, she has raised her children by herself.

### *Zaynab*

Zaynab, sixty one years old, has secondary school education and is a street seller. She is married and has four children. She did not have a job or participate in public events in the past because of her husband's abusive and violent behaviour and as she was not allowed to leave the house. She started working eleven years ago after her husband was hospitalised in a mental clinic.

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