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Cultural Change in Iran: Women's Rights and the Middle Class

Abstract

The influence of Western culture and the efforts of domestic intellectuals merely scratched the surface of pre-existing and traditional practices towards women in nineteenth-century Iran. However, they led to the rise of social movements, such as the women's rights movement. Modernisation and economic growth drove ongoing processes of industrialization and urbanization during the twentieth century in Iran. Modernization also changed the social structure by creating a new middle class. It is expected that economic growth and educational attainment would empower the new middle class to demand greater political accountability, which, in turn, would lead to women's empowerment. The new middle class participated in the 1979 revolution, the outcome of which was to accelerate the rise of religious leadership. The revolutionary government renewed traditional Shiʿite practices, including traditional norms concerning women. Since the revolution, despite the imposition of Islamic law, the level of literacy and access to higher education, particularly for women, has escalated. This has led to women's awareness of their rights and their struggles to realize them in practice. However, unexpectedly, the new middle class hesitated in turning revolutionary and in joining the protestors. This research assumes that education enables women to confront their traditional roles in the family. Nevertheless, changing women's position is a process of cultural change that is coherent with both socio-economic development and the rise of a strong middle class.

Key words: Iran; Women; Middle Class; Culture.

Introduction

The patriarchal Shiʿite[2] tradition has strongly shaped Iranian culture, including attitudes towards women in the nineteenth century,

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[2] Shiʿite: member of the smaller of the two major branches of Islam, the Shiʿah, distinguished from the majority Sunnis (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shii).

when the majority of Shiʿite clerics maintained the need for male control over women in the family structure. The Shiʿite clerics also strictly limited women's participation in social activities. Influenced by modern, Western ideas, some social reforms were co-opted by the state. Such reforms, along with the promotion of modern educational thinking mainly brought back by Iranian students from European countries, intertwined with Iran's Westernised-elites, introduced new concepts into Iranian society. Such changes led to the formation of a Women's rights movement in Iran in the early twentieth century. However, the Shiʿite tradition remained the dominant source of views about women in society.

The position of women in the family and society improved from a legal persepctive during the twentieth century due to state modernisation policy under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), supported by the new middle class. The new middle class enjoyed relatively high incomes and educational access and was thought to be part of a process of growing progressive values in society. However, the new middle class – in alliance with the Shiʿite clerics – turned against the state and participated in the Revolution of 1979. The revolutionary constitution authorised the Islamic government once more to control both the private and public lives of women based on Islamic law and Sharia.

Although the Islamic government imposed many restrictive Islamic laws to limit the position of women in the family and society, some reforms facilitated women's access to basic and higher education. Consequently, four decades after the revolution, Iranian women led demonstrations against gender discrimination and mandatory veiling in 2022. The most important feature of the demonstrations was the support of young men, for women's rights. It seems that despite the Islamisation policy of the government, the change in the position of women in the family has affected the culture towards the position of women in the family and society.

In this situation, it could be assumed that changing discriminatory laws which undermine women's rights would be an important factor in turning the newly-educated middle class against the government. However, unexpectedly, the new middle class hesitated in turning revolutionary and in joining the protestors. For the study of this issue, this research reviews the link between women's status in Iranian culture and the role of the middle class. Theories of cultural change are a key source of heuristic inspiration. They provide elements of a suitable methodological framework for this case.

Theoretical Framework

According to theories of social and cultural change, cultural change is a modification or discontinuance of existing 'tried' and 'tested' procedures. These are transmitted to people from past culture alongside the introduction of new forms. Scholars such as David Dressler and Donald E. Carns (Dressler and Carns 1973) note that all cultures have witnessed many changes, taking place under their own and global dynamics.

Riane Eisler, focusing on gender roles and women's rights in her theory of "Cultural Transformation", has been able to develop a theory that has an explanation for cultural transformation in different societies. Eisler talks of two cultures (models or systems) for structuring society: the partnership and the dominator model (Eisler 2002). Cultures based on partnership systems have the qualities such as democratic, egalitarian structures in the family, institutions, and politics; equal partnership between men and women. The dominator models refer to a model of society that have rigid top-down hierarchy in the family, institutions, and politics; ranking of men over women (Eisler 2003, xv).

Eisler believes real cultural change requires the abandonment of traditions of domination and violence in our primary gender and parent-child relations, that is the foundations on which dominator systems renew themselves (Gingerich 2016). Considering the characteristic of the partnership model, changing women's position in family and society requires democracy.

Eisler also noted that most cultures started to change due to modernisation and economic development in the twentieth century (Gingerich 2016). Based on modernisation theory, industrialization and economic development lead directly to positive social and political change. As Seymour Martin Lipset emphasizes, economic development generated a greater likelihood of democracy (Lipset 1959: 69). Therefore, based on modernisation theory, it can be assumed that socioeconomic development would lead to democracy and a subsequent change in culture and in women's position.

Samuel Huntington criticizes modernisation theory and rejects the argument for economic change and development being the prime factors responsible for the creation of stable, democratic political systems. As Francis Fukuyama noted, Huntington believed that political order was a good thing in itself and would not automatically arise out of the modernisation process. Rather the contrary: without political order, neither economic nor social development could proceed successfully (Huntington 2006: Xlll).

Huntington further noted that democracies are created not by causes but by causers. He placed emphasis on the importance of individual agents in the transition to democracy. He believed that the rise of the middle class was one of the major factors that significantly contributed to the occurrence and the timing of the third-wave transitions to democracy (Huntington 1991: 13, 107). Based on Huntington's argument, it can be assumed that the ability of the middle class to demand political accountability in the long term results in democracy and, therefore, change in the position of women.

Unexpectedly, findings from the World Values Survey indicate that support for gender equality is not just a consequence of democratisation. It is part of a broader cultural change that is transforming industrialized societies with mass demands for increasingly democratic institutions (World Values Survey 2023). Therefore, change in the position of women occurs if economic development, political change and cultural change go together in coherent and even, to some extent, predictable patterns (Welzel, Inglehart 2005: 19).

Shiʿite Tradition and the Position of Women in Iran: An Overview

The Safavid-Qizilbash dynasty (1501–1736) took control of Persia (Iran), after the 7th-century Muslim conquest of Persia. The Safavid made Shiʿite Islam the official state religion of Iran. Safavid's shahs (kings) needed the support of Shiʿite clerics both socially and politically. Thus, religion functioned as a legitimising tool for the actions of the rulers.

Shiʿite circles propounded new norms depending on the shah's power and their willingness to act. Gradually Islamic law (Sharia) became the dominate law and Shiʿite clerics held power in the court. In addition, the traditional system of education became Islamic in character and was carefully managed by the Shiʿite clerics. This led to a transformation of cultural values and norms in society, which affected the position and status of women in the family and society.

Before Islam, during the Sasanian Empire (224–651), Zoroastrianism as the state religion, endowed women with certain rights that were curtailed in the subsequent Islamic era. For instance there were regulations related to marriage and divorce that indicate Sasanian women had legal status and were allowed to pursue their rights in a court of law (Khatami 1983: 32). In addition, women had rights to property and education and they were free to participate in ceremonies and celebrations alongside men (Maksymiuk 2019: 3).

After the conquest of Persia by Arab Muslims, despite cultural resistance towards Arabic and Islamic cultures, Persian culture gradually changed and limited women's interactions with society. During the Safavid era, women's rights become subject to Islamic law and gradually Shiʿite jurisprudence (Gholizadeh 2018: 77). Shiʿite jurisprudence claimed God as the sole source of its rule aimed at ensuring the well-being of the family and society and the administration of justice, including over the family and the position of women.

According to Shiʿite jurisprudence, women had a lower status in the family system than men, and it was a religious obligation for women to obey their husbands (Bird 1899: 254). In addition, polygamy, unilateral divorce by husbands, and forced and under-age marriage were condoned (Astarabadi 1894). From the perspective of the majority of Shiʿite clerics, women's participation in social activities had no place in Islamic tradition. The majority of Shiʿite clerics believed that women's physical and mental capabilities were lower than men's; hence they were not suitable for activities outside of the house (Sedeghi 2005: 33).

Subsequently, women and girls were expected to wear *chador* (hijab) and cover their faces in public. The urban women's social interactions were very limited because almost all social spaces and activities of the city were dominated by men (Adams 1900: 144). Regarding education, some women from upper class enjoyed a broader education in the private space of home by special tutors (Wills 1891: 339). In some the traditional middle class families, including merchants (*bazaaris*) and clerics, girls were allowed to go to *maktab (*elementary schools where children learnt the Persian alphabet and some arithmetic and Quranic literacy) (Jewett 1909: 109). In general, women and men, from the lower classes, were illiterate in urban areas.

Women in the rural areas and the tribes were more engaged in social life. This was because women had constitutive contributions to agriculture and husbandry. As a result, women did not cover their faces as did urban women and had more freedom. Regarding education, the illiteracy rates in the villages and the tribes was very high even without considering gender (Abrahamian 1979: 413).

The Shiʿite tradition basically controlled women's position in the family and society in Iran until the late nineteenth century.

Western Influence and the Constitutional Revolution 1906

The nineteenth century was a period of fundamental economic development, social change and political reforms in Europe. The industrial revolution increased European demand for raw materials and new mar-

kets. Iran was a valuable market for European investors, who also sought political influence in Iran. As the century progressed, more and more Europeans travelled to Iran as tourists, diplomats, missionaries, educators and physicians, transmitting European cultural practices to the Iranian royal family and upper classes (Chehabi 2018: 22). This motivated the Shahs of Qajar dynasty (1789–1925), especially the 4th Shah of the Qajar, Naser al-Din Shah (1848–96), members of the royal families and upper classes to visit and spend time in European countries.

Naser al-Din Shah Qajar was extremely interested in Westernisation, and under his rule plans for restructuring the state were in fact accomplished by his ministers. Some limited reforms for changing the traditional education system led to the establishment of a modern school named Dar al-Fonun by Mirza Taghi Khan Farahani (1807–1852) known as Amir Kabir, the chief minister of Naser al-Din Shah. In addition, a Ministry of Science was established to be responsible for overseeing the activities of all institutions of learning in the country.

However, Naser al-Din Shah avoided conflict with the Shiʿite clerics particularly on religious issues such as changes in the legal system. This was because, the Shiʿite clerics had already done their best to stymie Westernisation. Westernisation would, after all, have reduced the power of the clerics in state institutions, education and the legal system. The Shiʿite clerics fought against the Shah's relations with European countries on numerous occasions. Regardless of the advantages or disadvantages of contracts and agreements with Europeans, the clerics were able to mobilize the masses against the Shah (Kasravi 1940: 10).

The shahs of Qajar also did not entirely support the intellectual and Westernized elites. The influence of Western culture and limited social reforms led to the emergence of intellectuals, mainly Westernised-elites who visited the outside world (Lindgren and Ross 2015: 440). The impact of modern ideas especially from the Enlightenment and 'modern European philosophy' on these intellectuals changed their views, beliefs, norms and notions. They adopted more modern practices and aimed to change society. The intellectuals tended to agree on religious fundamentalism as the cause of Iran's backwardness and sought reform. However, with the lack of state support, the intellectuals considered the political system as the main obstacle to reforms. They were inspired by European patterns of thought, in particular the French Revolution of 1789.

To achieve their aim of overthrowing the existing order, they needed some form of collaboration with the clerics to help mobilize the masses. Ultimately, such a collaboration led to the political transition from an authoritarian to parliamentary system through the Constitutional Revolution (1906) (also known as the Mashrooteh Revolution).

Formation of Women's Rights Movement

Influenced by European thought and culture, some voices were raised in support of women's rights inside Iran. The primary supporters were intellectuals such as Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh or Akhundov (1812–1878) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853–1896). They talked and wrote about women's right to education and the evils of polygamy and seclusion. While women's rights became a subject for some intellectuals, change started within the royal family and upper classes, as they tended to be more closely connected with Western culture (Chehabi 2018: 42), but these changes were mainly limited to the adoption of Western-style dress. This was a mere copy of Western style and did not affect women's outdoor dress (hijab). The only woman to remove her face veil in public was Fatimah Baraghani/Umm-i Salmih, also known as Tahereh Qurrat al-ʿAyn (1817–1852). Tahereh was born into a prominent clerical family in the city of Qazvin, Iran. Raised in a strict religious home, she nonetheless attended her father's lectures from behind a curtain and sometimes joined in discussions. She joined Sheikhism, a Shia school that believes in intermediaries between the people and Mahdi, the 12th Shia Imam. Later, she became a Babi activist, intellectual, and poet. She believed that women must be engaged in society and enjoy equal rights with men. Tahirih removed her veil at a conference of Babism in the hamlet of Badasht in 1848. The shah ordered the massacre of all Babis, and Tahirih was ultimately executed.

It is clear then that women from intellectual and Westernized elite families had a better idea of Western thought and culture and as a result, a group of women mainly from intellectual families started their movement for the reform of women's rights. They organized a series of meetings called Anjuman Azadi Zanan in 1899 at which men, along with women as family members, participated. Women's rights, particularly access to education, were the critical subject of these meetings. In 1902, Bibi Khanom Astarabadi founded the first modern school for Muslim women in Tehran. However the school was closed after 4 days due to the opposition of Shiʿite clerics (Warzee 1913: 168).

With the hope of change, reformist women supported the constitutionalists in street protests. In 1906, following the Constitutional Revolution, the Iranian nationalist movement succeeded in establishing a constitution, demanding the "equality of all citizens under law." Later, the Supplementary Fundamental Laws (October 7, 1907) made education compulsory for all Iranians. Therefore, Bibi Khanom Astarabadi reopened her modern school for girls named "Dabestan Dooshizegan"

(Maidens' Primary School). There were still, however, strong reactions from the traditional parts of society led by the Shiʿite clerics towards the school for girls.

Some clerics and conservatives saw schooling for girls as both detrimental to the position of women and contrary to religious principles. The Shiʿite clerics's power in issuing such orders came from the Supplementary Fundamental Laws. Article 18 of the constitution states that: "The study and teaching of science, education and art are free, except as prohibited by religious law" (The Supplementary Fundamental Laws of October 7, 1907). This gave the clerics the right to control and interfere in the law and women's rights to education.

It should be noted that Article 2 of the Supplement to the Constitution stipulated that a board of five knowledgeable members of clergy should be appointed to Parliament. These were responsible for reviewing the compatibility of all legislative acts with Sharia. Some Shiʿite clerics adopted a more moderate approach toward reforms, but the majority did not. Most clerics were against Western culture. They supported the constitutional revolution because it could restrict the shah's power. The Shiʿite clerics' priority was to resist any changes in Sharia law, especially on the position of women. Legal reform, in particular civil law, would have brought about a significant change in the position of women. Therefore, most attempts at reform at the system level in parliament faced clerical resistance. The introduction of the main concepts of constitutionalism such as freedom, law and equality – which were somehow connected to the issue of women's rights – became the main focus point for the conflicts between the discourses of tradition and modernity. Despite that, intellectuals insisted on women's right to education and the opening of modern school for girls. The Shiʿite clerics accepted a reopening of Astarabadi's school but only for girls from 4 to 6 years old in 1908 . The clerics considered girls at age 7 grown up.

As previously mentioned, the system of education was strictly traditional and Islamic in character and carefully managed by the clerics. The Shiʿite clerics' control over the education system had led to high illiteracy in the country. One source states that by 1921, the literacy rate in Tehran was 17%. That means 83% of the population of the capital was illiterate even after the reforms (Masjed Jamei 2004). The high illiteracy rate, along with religious belief, made people more supportive of the Shiʿite clerics than intellectuals. Therefore, while Western influences led to the formation of the women's rights movement, they did not change the culture of the majority.

Modernisation and Women's Rights (1925–1941)

Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944) started modernisation with the establishment of a strong state in 1925. The intellectuals stayed with Reza Shah because they thought that only a strong state coupled with Persian Nationalism could form a nation-state in Iran. They played a pivotal role in paving the way for the reforms. Some intellectuals such as Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr (1884–1962) played the role of ideologue of the Reza Shah's state and some others including Mohammad Ali Foroughi (1887–1942) and Ali-Akbar Davar (1885–1937), had an office within the court.

The process of economic development took place alongside a deepening sense of social change. Reza Shah's government applied the secularisation process through legal system reforms and the educational system. One of Reza Shah's anti-clerical aims was to focus on removing the clerics from the central position of power that they had continuously occupied. Therefore, the old Ministry of Justice was dissolved and in 1927, new personnel, many of whom had received a European education, took over the administration of the new Ministry of Justice from the former clerical officials.

Following that, a commission within the newly formed Ministry of Justice headed by Ali-Akbar Davar (1885–1937), presented to the Majles the first volume of the Civil Code; as well as a judicial reorganisation bill establishing a hierarchy of courts. One objective of the Civil Code was the secularisation of the courts (Ameli 2015). The clerics lost power, and also a particularly vital source of revenue when a law reassigned the registration of legal documents concerning property from the Sharia to secular courts (Gods 1991: 225).

The Civil Code was inspired by the secular codes of European countries such as France and Belgium. When it came to family law, classical Shi'a legal concepts and rulings remained almost intact as part of the new Civil Code. However, in 1931 the Majles approved a new civil code that granted women the right to ask for divorce under certain conditions. In addition, the creation of new courts and procedural rules for registering marriages and divorces drastically curtailed the administrative and judicial functions of the clerical establishment. Based on the new civil code the legal age for marriage for girls was increased to 13 (The Civil Code 1935, Article 1041).

State-controlled education began by divesting maktabs (traditional schools). The government replaced these with a Western-modelled curriculum instead of a curriculum based on religious subjects. In 1941,

more than 300 modern schools were founded in Tehran and provincial towns, and enrolment reached about 27,000 students (Bhat and Khaki 2015: 46). The number of students at all levels of secular schools in primary education alone reached 138,947, and another 9,661 were enrolled in high schools. By 1940 there were 670 elementary schools for boys, with 114,116 pupils; 117 for girls, with 21,790 pupils; and 1,524 mixed, with 60,169 girls and 70,830 boys. There were also over 150,000 adults in evening programmes alone (Ministry of Culture 1940).

Reza Shah's reform plan led to modern schools opening up for girls and encouraging women into higher education as well. The number of female students rose in the period 1926-27 from 17,000 in elementary schools and 700 in secondary schools to 47,000 and 2,000 respectively in 1936–37 (Najmabadi 2005: 49).

Women were encouraged to apply for admission to the University of Tehran and the first female student was accepted in 1935. Reza Shah ordered Ali-Asghar Hekmat, his minister of education, to establish the Kanoun-e Banovan (Women's Center), headed by Shams, Reza Shah's daughter, and Hajar Tarbiyat. The government reforms also included female employment in the state bureaucracy, opening some public areas to women's participation (Erfan newspaper 1941).

The women's rights movement benefited from the condition as women did not have to struggle for the right to education any more. However, Reza Shah's reforms were not only in response to the women's rights movement. It was part of the state's reforms and modernisation programme. In 1935, Reza Shah ordered the compulsory unveiling of women and banned the hijab known as Kashf-e hijab.

The compulsory unveiling received a mixed reception among the minorities of the elite and new middle class women such as Sediqeh Dowlatabadi (1882–1961), a journalist and one of the pioneering figures in the women's rights movement. The new middle class, whose the number increased due to the socio-economic development, followed or obeyed the order (Schayegh 2002: 342–343). The idea did not receive support from some intellectuals, such as Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr (1884–1962). He believed in the right to choose whether to wear the hijab or not. However, the new middle class was too weak to support the intellectuals and enforce government accountability. Personalities from the new middle class constantly intended to move into the political elite or becoming statesmen (Bill 1970), however, Reza Shah was too distrustful to allow this group to have any influence in government or gain power (Gods 1991: 228). Gradually, Reza Shah dismissed those intellectual constitutionalists who took office as minsters, including Ali-Akbar Davar, the founder of the modern judicial system of Iran.

At this juncture, the press was controlled and, with the establishment of the Department of Press and Propaganda, the state increased its control over all printed matter. Radio remained a state monopoly (Axworthy 2008: 225). Political parties virtually ceased to exist. Elections were strictly controlled, with Reza Shah often selecting the "winning" candidates for parliamentary seats (Massoudian 1992: 126).

In the rural areas resistance to cultural change was stronger than in cities. In 1935 more than a third of Iran's total population (15 million) lived in rural areas (Statista 2020). It should be noted that education policies were not rigorously enforced. In 1940, only 10% of all elementary-age children were enrolled in school, and less than 1% of youths between the ages of 12 and 20 were in secondary school. Consequently, despite all attempts, Iran still had an illiteracy rate of over 90%, when Reza Shah abdicated in 1941 (Bhat and Khaki 2015: 46).[3]

Based on Reza Shah's plan, the primary emphasis in the modernizing process was placed on technology, industrialization, the army and administration, with only moderate attention paid to social institutions. Modernisation did not cover political institutions. There was no desire or purposeful action to change the political institutions and procedures. With all the reforms initiated by Reza Shah to move Iran into the modern world, he reinforced the strong authoritarian patterns which for centuries had existed in Iran.

Mohammad Reza Shah's Reforms and Women's Political Rights (1941–1979)

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) continued the modernisation plan after his father. He implemented modernisation and secularisation, despite the rise of Islamic and fundamentalist groups such as the Devotees of Islam (Fadaʾian-e Islam). In 1945, Sayyed Mojtaba Mirlawḥi (1924–1956) a Shiʿit cleric claimed descent from the Safavids and adopted the princely title Nawab Ṣafawi. The Devotees of Islam demanded a return to the veil in public and attempted to block women's suffrage as initiated by the women's rights movement. However, the new middle class and some political parties such as Tudeh Party (the Left-Wing Party) continued to support women's rights.

[3] Reza Shah was forced to abdicate by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran on 16 September 1941.

After the fall of Reza Shah, parliamentary rule, political parties, trade unions, and the press were restored. In such conditions, the new middle class was moulded around party political platforms and organisations, mainly the Tudeh Party and the National Front coalition. The country's political situation also influenced the women's rights movement.

Women's political organisations were established and many progressive women's organisations - the most active, the women's branch of the Tudeh Party, which attracted many students, teachers, and secular women and men - were founded in the 1940s (Beck and Nashat, 2004, p. 24). The Women's Party of Iran (Ḥezb-e zanan-e Iran), founded in 1942 by Ṣafiya Firuz, transformed into the Iranian Women's Council. In 1963, Mohammad Reza Shah granted political rights to women through the White Revolution project. The immediate impact of women's right to vote was visible in the representation of six women in the Majles and two in the Senate within a year (1965). However, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989) an influential Shi'it cleric led the opposition to the White Revolution and women's emancipation, and more generally to the modernisation programme perceived as political, cultural, and economic subordination to the West, mainly the United States. Ayatollah Khomeini was arrested and exiled to France in 1964.

Although, the White Revolution affected women's social and political activities mainly in the large cities, women's status in the family legally improved with the Family Protection Law, promulgated in 1967. This law supported women's equality under the influence of the reformist view of the Nascent Women's Movement[4] and overlooked Islamic law. It established rules concerning the equal rights of men and women (The Family Protection Law 1967). In 1974, the Family Protection Law of 1967 was amended to enhance women's rights in relation to their husbands. The Family Protection Law abolished extrajudicial divorce, greatly limited polygyny, and established special Family Courts for dealing with matters relating to the new personal status legislation. Consequently, women's rights improved legally and politically under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

However, to modernise society and change women's status in the family and society, the government also had to deal with rampant illiteracy. Based on statistics in 1976, only 12,877,000 people over age 15 of the total population of 33,708,744, were literate, meaning an illiteracy rate of 63% (Indexmundi 2013). In particular the 76% female illiteracy

[4] The women's movement of the 1960s and '70s, the so-called "second wave" of feminism.

rate allowed the Shi ʿite tradition to remain as the dominated culture in the family structure (Indexmundi 2013). Ultimately, the societal tendency towards religious and superstitious beliefs remained intense in Iran.

The New Middle Class and the Revolution of 1979

The US coup d'état against the democratically elected government of prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh on August 19, 1953, which was in favour of strengthening the monarchical rule of the Shah, affected the new middle class-state relations which could theoretically play a major role in Iran's modernisation and the women's rights movement.

By increasing the oil revenue, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi undertook the modernizing of the economy and much of its infrastructure. The Gross Domestic Product per capita increased from $5,743.2 in 1970 to $7,622.34 in 1976 (Trading Economics 2023). Such economic growth increased the number of the industrial working class and the new middle class. The new middle class enjoyed relatively high incomes and educational access, and was thought to be part of a process of burgeoning progressive values in society. However, relying on high oil revenues, Mohammad Reza Shah's government became detached from society. On March 2, 1975, the Shah of Iran declared the end of the multi-party system in the country. He replaced it with a single-party system, called the Hezbe Rastakhiz Mellete Iran (Resurrection Party of Iranian Nation), in accordance Rule 3 of the Royal system, the constitution, and the revolution of the Shah and the Nation. Although the Iranian state seemed to be autonomous, strong and stable, by increasing the Shah's authority, the demands of opponents and the traditional middle class (clerics and merchants) became a source of threat to the state's stability. Ayatollah Khomeini was in exile but he maintained his leadership in opposition groups to Mohammad Reza Shah until the Revolution of 1979.

The clerics were supported by the majority, who remained devoted to the Shi ʿite tradition. Despite the government implementing certain fiscally redistributionist policies in relation to the working class to boost its material conditions, members of the working class who grew up in traditional familial matrices did not change their social values and remained faithful to Shi ʿite tradition.

Ultimately, the new middle class joined the opposition and grew into a perceived source of threat to supporters of the system in 1979. Despite Ayatollah Khomeini's traditional view towards women, Iranian women become major participants in the revolution. Many women activists were

professional women of secular middle-class families who supported intellectuals and political groups (Sedghi 2005: 356).

The new middle class's aim was political transition, but Shi'ite clerics were looking for cultural change based on the concept of the Islamisation of society. Despite almost a century of modernisation, unexpectedly, the new middle class accepted the establishment of the Islamic government. This was ultimately the reason that the Shi'ite clerics could achieve their aim of Islamisation.

Women's Rights and Cultural Change

In 1979, the majority of Iranians voted to establish an Islamic government led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini implemented a policy of Islamisation, which aimed to purify the country from the influence of Western culture. The goal was to restore Iran's traditions and culture, based solely on its Islamic past. As a result, a constitution was drawn up based on Islamic and Sharia law. This policy extended to women's lives, and the new constitution authorised the Islamic government to control both the private and public lives of women.

The Shi'ite clerics valued most highly the traditional role of women in a segregated society. Although they enjoyed women's support during the revolution as they did in the Constitutional Revolution, they changed the family law from the perspective of the Shi'a Jurisprudence. For instance, the government reverted the marriage age to 9 for girls and 15 for boys. Restrictions on polygamy and temporary marriages were also repealed.

Moreover, with the dominant power of the Shi'ite clerics and in the absence of activities of the main left-wing and liberal political groups, the Islamists were able to restore the compulsory nature of veiling and enforce it harshly. In addition, a public dress code for females was approved. The new laws barred women from the presidency, leadership, judiciary, and certain educational fields. Ultimately, the Shi'ite traditional patriarchal approach revived the traditional gender identity of Iranian women in the family and society.

The revolutionary environment and the excitement of defending the homeland caused by the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) helped the government to implement a policy of Islamisation without significant opposition. After the war, wealth from oil revenue brought uneven economic and social development in the cities, and the rate of growth of the new middle class increased. The new middle class demanded social and political

freedoms, which finally led to the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential election of 1997.

The social and political reforms affected the situation for women. As opposed to the early years of the revolution, when the government imposed many restrictions for female students regarding, for example, university entrance - which led in turn to a sharp decline in progress on this front - the new environment promoted women's access to higher education. As a result, the number of female students increased from 36.1% in 1996 to 53.4% in 2003. In 2020 about 49% of university students were female (Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education 2021). At the same time, youth literacy rates for females aged 15 to 24 years were 81% in 1997 and reached 97.5% in 2020 (Statistical Centre of Iran 2021). In 2020 the literacy rate of women above the age of 15 years reached 85% in comparison to the men's rate of 80% (Statista, 2021). The main effect of a high rate of literacy and higher education was women's awareness of their rights. This challenged the traditional position of women in the family. Women started to abandon different aspects of traditions, including marriage, childbirth and divorce.

There is an association between the age of first marriage and education. Based on Shia tradition, the most suitable age of marriage for girls is nine. However, historical reforms implemented by Reza Shah and later Mohammad Reza Shah raised the legal age of marriage for women to 13 in 1935 and 18 in 1974, respectively. While these legislative changes impacted the average age of marriage, they were unable to completely eliminate early marriages in many parts of the country.

For example, research conducted in southwestern Iran indicates that the mean age at first marriage in this region was 16.9 years between 1954 and 1974 (Malekmakan et al. 2018: 4–5). The age at first marriage was found to have a positive association with the educational levels of both women and men (Malekmakan et al. 2018: 9). Another study conducted in the city of Shiraz revealed that the impact of education on the age of marriage was most pronounced among women who had received some education beyond high school (Momeni 1979: 94 and Malekmakan et al. 2018: 7), highlighting that higher levels of education, particularly education beyond high school, are associated with delays in the age of marriage among women.

After the Islamic revolution, the legal age of marriage for women decreased from 18 to 9. Subsequently, reformist efforts only managed to increase it back to 13 in 2002. However, over the past three decades, with the rise in women's literacy rates, there has been a notable increase in the median age at marriage. The average age of marriage for females

rose from 19.7 years in 1977 to 22 years in 2011, according to the Statistical Centre of Iran (2021). Since 2014, the average age of marriage for women residing in urban and rural areas is 23.7 and 21.4 years, respectively (Statistical Centre of Iran 2022). However, in certain cities like Tehran, the average age of marriage exceeds 28 years (Hamshahrionline 2022).

In recent decades, according to a survey, the possibility of marriage among 'women who graduated from primary school, secondary school, high school, and university is, respectively, 43.0, 60.3, 68.6, and 65.0 percent lower than that of those without education' (Torabi and Baschieri 2010: 46). This shift can be attributed to changes in the nature of family obligations. For instance, traditionally, fathers played a significant role in determining their daughters' marriages. However, educated women now prefer to choose their own husbands, and their expectations have increased in various areas, such as their spouse's social class and economic position (Malekmakan et al 2018: 7).

In addition, along with the shift in the age of marriage, there has been a notable decrease in the average number of births per woman in Iran. Traditionally, it was considered a significant responsibility for women to bear and raise many children, often confining them to domestic roles. However, over time, there has been a substantial decline in fertility rates. According to the World Bank (2021), the average number of births per woman has decreased from 6.5 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2020. This decline reflects changing societal norms, and a significant shift in reproductive behavior and the roles and aspirations of women in Iranian society.

On the other hand, divorce has been a significant concern for married women within the context of family traditions. Islamic doctrine generally discourages divorce, but under the law, husbands have the right to unilateral divorce, while wives are unable to prevent their husbands from divorcing them. Even when the divorce is initiated by the husband, women were, by default, held accountable. They would subsequently receive many improper job offers, were the object of destructive rumours, and find difficulty starting a new relationship. Following tradition, the divorce rate was relatively low, with fewer than one divorce per 1,000 individuals in 1978, despite the change of law in 1975. In 1975, the third version of the Family Protection Law was enacted, which abolished the absolute right of husbands to divorce and granted both husbands and wives the right to seek divorce. Despite this legal change, cultural and societal pressures surrounding divorce persisted, leading to challenges for divorced women in various aspects of their lives.

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979, the absolute right of husbands to divorce their wives was reinstated, although the divorce process did require court involvement. However, in 2002, as part of reforms, women in Iran gained the right to initiate divorce as well. Since then, there has been a significant and unprecedented increase in the number and rate of divorces in Iran. The divorce rate rose to 2 per 1,000 people in 2011 and reached 2.2 in 2022, ranking Iran 25th on the list of countries with the highest divorce rates, surpassing rates in countries like Ireland and Italy. Remarkably, statistics indicate that nearly 80% of divorce cases are initiated by women (Etemad Newspaper, 2018). While factors such as economic instability play a role in the increasing divorce rate, a structural perspective highlights that a higher level of female literacy is positively associated with divorce initiation and rejection of traditional norms.

Furthermore, there has been a rise in the number of women filing complaints for domestic violence. In 2020, over 75,000 women lodged complaints with the Coroner's Office regarding violence inflicted by their husbands, according to official government sources (Entekhab Newspaper, 2022). These trends reflect changing dynamics within Iranian society, with women asserting their rights and seeking to challenge traditional gender norms and harmful behavior within marital relationships.

In recent years, while many women have achieved significant progress in improving their conditions within families, their struggle for empowerment has created challenges in traditional settings. This is evident in the disturbingly aggressive behavior exhibited by some men who resort to punishing girls or women who defy their fathers' or husbands' commands (Entekhab Newspaper 2023). This phenomenon has contributed to a rise in honour killings over the past decade. While honour killings are not a new phenomenon, according to reports, there were approximately 8,000 reported cases of honour killings between 2010 and 2014 (Parsa 2021). Additionally, self-immolation has distressingly increased among women in Kurdish regions and the province of Ilam. (Pishkhan News 2017). These seem to stem from women's rightful demands for freedom, such as the refusal to accept forced marriages and the desire to have autonomy in choosing their future spouses, pursuing education, and engaging in employment.

Women demands for their rights faced resistance from the government and Shi'ite clerics. Some women activists and members of the women's rights movement were arrested. The reforms changed women's social lives in comparison with the two first decades after the revolution,

but many rights, including that of women to choose the hijab, were not even the subject of discussion. The right to choose the hijab was a demand of modern and professional women. However, the mandatory veiling law was not a priority for reformists or society during the reformation. Many women continued to fight against the limitations, particularly compulsory veiling and the official Islamic dress code in public, by ignoring the state's rules. This was the reason that in 2022 the conservatives who had control over all central institutions in the government's political structure tried to restrict women's rights under the hijab ruling.

On 16 September 2022, the death of a 22 year old woman, Mahsa Amini, who was detained by the morality police for not having a proper hijab, led to protests against the government. The women protesters demanded women's rights and burned their scarfs and veils. The main slogan of the protests "women-life-freedom" (Zan-Zindagi-Azadi) was repeated across the country by young women and men.

It seems these protests had an important characteristic which showed the starts of cultural transformation in society. For the first time, young Iranian men supported women's secular demand to end the strict Islamic law on compulsory hijab. This support indicated the changing the position of women in the family from Shi'ite traditional to secular and modern, almost five centuries after the establishment of Shi'ite rulers in the country. This change might not be at the same level in all parts of the country or social classes, but it is occurring.

Therefore, access to education has enabled women to confront their traditional roles in the family. However, change in women's status is a process of personal and social change. It was expected that the new middle class would turn against the government in support of women's rights, but the new middle class hesitated to join the unrest.

The most important reason behind the new middle class's silence is its weakness and dependence on the state. The middle class's vulnerability has been intensified as a result of unsuccessful economic liberalization and political marginalization during authoritarian rule. Due to the economic crisis, the new middle class has become more conservative, as it is dependent on the state. For instance, 60 percent of employed educated people work for the government and about 3.5 million also are receiving state pensions (Eghtesad Online 2018). In this condition, the priorities of the middle class are based more on self-interest and stability, and not necessarily democratic goals.

At the same time, the Iranian state clearly has been capable of preventing the formation of social groups and democratic organisations,

making it difficult for the new middle class to push for change. Therefore, access to education was an essential element in producing a new culture and change in the women's position in the family, however, economic crisis and absence of political order have impeded the process of cultural change in Iran.

Conclusion

It is a truism to say that all cultures change, both under their own and external dynamics. The results of this study show that - influenced by Western thought and culture - Iranian society has witnessed various changes. Under the impact of Western thought, domestic Westernised-elites and intellectuals, Iranian society tended to support the political transition from an authoritarian system to a parliamentary system through the Persian Constitutional Revolution

The Constitutional Revolution introduced new concepts including citizenship rights to society. However, the intellectuals' attempts to include women in this concept failed and Shi ʿite jurisprudence remained the dominant source of civil law and therefore family law. The intellectuals supported modernisation imposed by the Pahlavi dynasty to create a modern and secular society. Modernisation in the socio-economic sphere led to the rise of a new middle class. It was expected that economic growth and educational attainment would empower the middle class to demand greater political accountability, which in turn would lead to women's empowerment. Due to the absence of political order, the new middle class turned against the system in 1979. The intensively revolutionary middle class helped the Shi ʿite tradition to rebuild itself as the dominant culture once more in Iranian society.

While strict Islamic law has limited women's rights under the Islamic government, women's access to education has escalated. This is the main reason that cultural change has started with women's fight against gender discrimination. However, the women's rights movement suffers from the lack of support from the new middle class. In this research, it has been concluded that given the nature of rentier state-dominated power, the new middle class political and social activities are limited. Therefore, the new middle class has tended to place less value on women's rights. It seems that the revolutionary middle class has grown increasingly conservative over time due to its socio-economic instability. It is not any more politically active under the authoritarian rule. This issue has affected the process of democratisation and changing the position of women in society.

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Zmiany kulturowe w Iranie: prawa kobiet i klasa średnia

Streszczenie

Wpływ kultury zachodniej i wysiłki rodzimych intelektualistów zaledwie zarysowały powierzchnię tradycyjnych praktyk wobec kobiet w dziewiętnastowiecznym Iranie. Doprowadziły one jednak do powstania ruchów społecznych, takich jak ruch na rzecz praw kobiet. Modernizacja i wzrost gospodarczy napędzały trwające w XX wieku procesy industrializacji i urbanizacji w Iranie. Modernizacja zmieniła także strukturę społeczną, tworząc nową klasę średnią. Oczekiwano, że wzrost gospodarczy i wyższy poziom wykształcenia skłonią nową klasę średnią do żądania większej odpowiedzialności politycznej, co z kolei doprowadzi do wzmocnienia pozycji kobiet. Nowa klasa średnia uczestniczyła w rewolucji 1979 r., której rezultatem było ugruntowanie przywództwa religijnego. Rząd rewolucyjny odnowił tradycyjne praktyki szyickie, w tym tradycyjne normy dotyczące kobiet. Od czasu rewolucji, pomimo narzucenia prawa islamskiego, wzrósł poziom alfabetyzacji oraz dostęp do szkolnictwa wyższego, szczególnie dla kobiet. Doprowadziło to do obudzenia świadomości kobiet w zakresie ich praw i wysiłków zmierzających do ich realizacji w praktyce. Nieoczekiwanie jednak nowa klasa średnia wahała się przejść na stronę rewolucji i przyłączyć się do protestujących. W badaniu tym założono, że edukacja umożliwia kobietom skonfrontowanie się z ich tradycyjnymi rolami w rodzinie. Zmiana pozycji kobiet jest jednak procesem zmiany kulturowej, spójnym zarówno z rozwojem społeczno-gospodarczym, jak i powstaniem silnej klasy średniej.

Słowa kluczowe: Iran, kobiety, klasa średnia, kultura