

A New Phase of Violence against Women in Contemporary Iran: Identity's Marginalization, and Women's Resistance

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Abstract

This paper is a feminist critical reflection on the acid attacks on women in Esfahan, Iran, in October 2014. In this paper, I argue that the state-nation relationship in Iran led to the introduction of legislation that was even more patriarchal than it was before. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the marginalization of women shaped a different silhouette, and in accordance, the configuration of women's resistance was different in a way that the autocratic state could not tolerate. As a result, a series of acid attacks occurred in one of the most well-known historical cities of Iran, Esfahan, in which, at least based on news reports, four women were victimized. This article, analyzes the social, cultural, religious, and political aspects of this attack and women's resistance and its impact on the law of the current constitution of Iran.

Keywords: acid attack, state-nation, Shari'ah, Islam, women's rights, identity, violence against women

Introduction

Roots of Women's Marginalization in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Since the so-called Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, there have been dramatic changes in the status of women. Although women had participated in the revolution for regime change in order to achieve more social justice in all aspects of their lives, with the establishment of an Islamic state that follows Fegh or Shari'ah,¹ women were considered to be second-class citizens in the social, political, cultural, and religious realms. The fact of women's being secondary to men, and in their service, was not clearly brought to light in the media, but its agenda to marginalize women—and their bodies—was clear in the Islamic state's legislation. According to Yuval-Davis and Anthias (Kandiyoti, 1994), central to the state's attention is the control of women and their sexuality because the state perceives the nation as a woman, and, therefore, it is the state's responsibility to take care of women. With this in mind, it is ironic that the state needs women, and yet those women should not have agency over changes and the establishment of human rights legislation. Accordingly, in silencing women's voices, men would empower themselves and rule the nations as they wish.

The foundation of Iran's state regulation is based in Fegh or Shari'ah. The sources of Fegh, or Shari'ah, are the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) actions and quotations—the Sunnah, as recorded in the Hadith, the documentation of which was collected at least 200 years after the Prophet's death (True Islam, n.d.). This documentation was begun mainly by Omar, the second successor to the Prophet. The first successor, Abubaker, and the fourth, Ali, also contributed some quotations. In addition, Ayshah, one of the Prophet's wives, had a hand in this documentation, following Abu-Hurireh, who did not know the Prophet as well, but who produced two to three times more material than the others. As a result, most critical intellectual feminist writers question the reliability and validity of this text, asking who speaks on behalf of God and to what extent this documentation is in line with the content of the Qur'an, the Muslim Holy Book (Abou El Fadl, 2002; Razack, 2007; Reda, 2004; Sonbol, 2003; Quraishi, 2008). I would also argue that, besides the importance of the reliability and validity of these texts, how do we know exactly what the Prophet's intentions were by these actions and words?

¹Shari'ah applies to Islamic law, whereas Fegh refers to different schools of thought in understanding Islamic law. Fegh is the theory of Shari'ah, and the different schools of thought would interpret and practice differently.

We are aware that some schools of Islam look to authenticate the chain in the creation of the Hadith and Sunnah; however, should Muslims rely on the Qur'an, which was documented in the Prophet's time by people who were literate and, over almost 30 years, was compiled as a book by a group of trustworthy people, or should they rely on the documentation of the Prophet's speech and deeds based on the narration of others and compiled two to three hundred years later? Should those texts be interpreted based on the Qur'an, or should the Qur'an be interpreted based on the Hadith and Sunnah?

In addition, I would argue that the main theme of the Hadith and the Sunnah is based on the exclusion of women and their marginalization from the public sphere—with no voice in the private sphere either.² Because of this, many in the clergy, and others in authority positions, who follow mainly Shari'ah law, discriminate against women and disregard their rights, and they also read the Qur'an through a patriarchal lens—a very discriminatory lens—without considering its social-cultural and historical contexts. In other words, they interpret Shari'ah mainly in isolation, without considering the subject in the current social and cultural contexts. The important point is that there is no evidence in the Qur'an that women should be excluded from having rights. Certainly, a few sentences in Qur'an regarding witness, inheritance, and sexual relationships should be read and interpreted in their social, historical, and cultural contexts. According to Wadud (2006), we as people are changing, and our understanding is also changing; we understand that the Qur'an is dynamic and the text can be interpreted as we change. This is the miracle of the Qur'an—it is multilayered, and people base its meaning on their own understanding. However, we can argue that we need to know the methodology for reading the Qur'an. Reading and interpreting with different methods result in different understanding, e.g. the ISIS interpretation to a progressive understanding (Barlas, 2003; Wadud, 2006).

Needless to say, pre-modern Shari'ah was regarded as more egalitarian by Muslims, but with the establishment of the so-called modern state-nation, it became more discriminatory (Sonbol, 2003). In contemporary Iran, Shari'ah based on the Sheie branch is a predominant law that shapes gender inequality.

This is evident in Islamic schools in Iran,³ where, instead of teaching the hermeneutic of the Qur'an to improve the students' knowledge they produce and reproduce a patriarchal understanding of it based on Hadith and Sunnah, which interpret the Qur'an through an oppressive lens (Barlas, 2003). In other words, the *ulama*, or clergy, do not consider the historical and cultural contexts of the Qur'an, and they do not read it through macro and micro lenses to get a more comprehensive understanding of the text. Therefore, this static and passive reading of the Qur'an, and relying more on the biased Hadith that supports gender inequality, will contribute to a rise in social injustice in the society. In this way, the Qur'an is understood out of context and the wrong message is applied to the nation, causing injustice, specifically for women.

With this way of interpreting the Qur'an, the Islamic State of Iran, without a doubt, has gradually changed the pre-revolution laws to completely autocratic rules and regulations. One of the predominant rules over women was the control of their bodies because women's thoughts, perspectives, identities, willingness, and passions can manifest themselves in their way of living, as such in their bodies. In other words, throughout history, women's bodies were regulated, disciplined, and controlled by the male members of the family and the state, market, corporations, and others to pursue their agendas (Hoodfar, 1993; Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, n.d; Kandiyoti, 1994; Rice, 2005).

As an example, one year after the victory of the revolution, the *hijab*, or veiling,⁴ became mandatory for all women, regardless of age, religion, beliefs, or other factors.⁵ This was just the starting point in women's marginalization—the ignoring of their identities and the unhearing of their voices.

²Examples of women's exclusion include that they pray at home rather than go to the mosque, unveiled women are the root of evil, women need their husbands' permission to go out, and they are not allowed to wear perfume when going out. However, Ayshah's documentation is more egalitarian; for example, she advocated that women be free to go out for their needs (King, Slave of Allah, 2012). 43 important Hadith about women in Islam. *Islam—World's Greatest Religion*. Retrieved from <https://islamgreatreligion.wordpress.com/2012/04/23/43-important-hadith-about-women-in-islam-must-read-by-women>

³These schools are run in Qom and Mashhad, two important cities in Iran; however, other cities also have such schools. All these schools depend financially on the support of the people and the state, and the clergy are produced via this schooling.

⁴The hijab can be a veil that covers the head and chest, or the head, face, and entire body.

⁵In 1927, unveiling became mandatory under the new regime of Pahlavi in Iran.

Foucault talks about the construction of bio-power in a state-nation relationship; women's sexuality and their bodies are regulated and disciplined based on power (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, n.d.). In other words, one's body and sexuality would not be far from the dominant political, economic, and cultural power in society. Through this lens, we understand that in Iran, women's bodies are one way in which the state represents what it is to be Islamic—locally and globally. Through this identity assimilation, there is no room for women to find their true position in a male-dominated culture.

In addition, following the Cultural Revolution⁶ and after the reopening of the universities, some restrictions were applied to female students. For example, they were not allowed to study in so-called men's programs, such as mining, agriculture, and archaeology because it was thought that such disciplines did not match a woman's nature. However, there have been some changes in recent decades, but because women would not get work in areas related to their fields of study, and also because they outnumbered men in the universities, it was thought that it would be better to apply those restrictions over them. The same limitation was applied to men regarding so-called female programs, such as gynaecology, which, it was believed, men should not practise.⁷ Regarding family and the private sphere, all rights were given to men, such as custody of children, divorce rights,⁸ inheritance,⁹ witnesses,¹⁰ and any other related privileges, rather than taking into account the situation and the context. In these circumstances, women's identity in Iran gradually dissolved in favour of men's privilege. Women's personalities, characters, and rights are governed by the state's male supporters. As a result, women's resistance started to take shape.

Background to the Acid Attack: Women's Bodies in Public Sphere of Iran

As said before, the Islamic State of Iran wished to have Islamic representation locally and globally. Locally, the state's domination over women's bodies began more harshly than in any other Arab country that followed Islamic rules. To most Arabs, there was no contradiction between their culture and religion; they were intertwined as Islam started from that region, and their language was also the language in which the Qur'an is written. On the other hand, Iran's official language is Farsi (there are several others, but they are spoken by far fewer people), and the country is linked to Persian history, so Iranians often find themselves in a dilemma over their culture and religion. This conflict manifests itself in the construction of the nation-state, whereby Iranians, being Muslim and Persian, have more constraints and repression imposed on them for not being proper Muslims in the way the state would like.

The supreme leader, who controlled all regulations in spite of parliament's existence, was only interested in practising Shari'ah, which favoured men. Through this control and domination, the autocratic state gradually interfered with Iran's institutions. One of the primary areas of exploitation was the control of women's bodies and the limiting of their social and human rights. Significant in this exploitation was the necessity for women to cover themselves with the hijab in the public sphere, which allowed the authorities to show the world that Iran was an Islamic country. In addition, the control of women's bodies was extended to other social, cultural, and economic restrictions. For example, although half of the university students are women, the unemployment rate for educated women is 16.7% compared with men at 6.8%, and 13% of women are in top management positions compared with men at 87% (Iran Labour Report, 2010). In addition, women's earnings make up 11% of total earning compared with men at 89% (Iran Labour Report, 2010). In 2012, women held 3.1% of the seats in parliament out of 290 seats (UN data, n.d.). In general, of the 259 to 290 parliamentary candidates over several years, women's presence was from 3 to a maximum of 14 (Nikou, 2011).

⁶In 1980, right-wing supporters of the state attacked all the universities, and under the name of the Cultural Revolution, closed the universities, following which, most of the students and faculty who were in opposition went into exile, or they were arrested and jailed. In addition, universities that had courses in English had to have them translated into Farsi in an attempt to have more Islamic than Western-style universities.

⁷Iran ranks high in the world with regard to the number of women attending university. The country is fifth in the world for women studying mathematics, science, and related topics, and 60% of university students in Iran are women. However, in a society where men are the priority, women have fewer job opportunities. (Women in Iran (n.d.) . Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Iran#Role_in_Economy

⁸Recently, a woman in Iran now has the right to have a prenuptial agreement regarding divorce; otherwise, this used to be inherently a man's right.

⁹Based on the orthodox understanding of the Qur'an, men earn twice as much as women.

¹⁰Regarding witnesses in court, testimonies by two women is equal to the testimony of one man.

Analyzing from a critical feminist perspective, we notice that the women who did hold seats in parliament recently made decisions through a masculine lens. For example, according to Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, a former reformist parliamentary candidate, conservative women in the senate defended polygamy because they considered it to be an Islamic value (Nikou, 2011). They also defended segregation and division of labor by gender. In another example, Haghighatjoo continued that Eshragh Shaegh, a representative from Tabriz in the previous parliament, said that if 10 prostitutes were executed, there would not be any more prostitution in the country since it would be considered too dangerous or criminal (Nikou, 2011). Haghighatjoo continued, saying that we have more conservative women in parliament because of the powerful influence of the state; it rejected the views of reformist women and made sure that only women who were loyal to the supreme leader won the election.¹¹ Thus, through this masculine lens, those conservative women act through a “double operation” (Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 78). They do not have any agency; they operate through the masculine concepts that men desire. However, they are present in parliament, and this presence does not lead to social change—or justice—for women.

On the other hand, as the wearing of the hijab in public is enforced, and women have no choice, some women use their bodies as a means of resistance. (Certainly, there are many women who like to practise hijab; however, they are not the subject of this article. I am criticizing the institutionalization of control over women’s bodies.) To show their opposition, some women tried to disobey the regulations regarding veiling. This rebellion was not tolerated by the right wing of the state, and they forced parliament to pass a law to protect the people who were involved in the policing of women’s bodies.

To clarify, I need to explain a concept in the Qur’an regarding the obligations of *amr-bil-marooif* (ordering for acknowledged virtues) and *nahi-anil-munkar* (forbidding from sin) that emphasize that to be on the righteous path, people must say prayers and pay the *zakat*, or tax (Islamic-Law.com, n.d). Allah, in the chapter “Ale Imran,” sentence 41, states, “Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity” (Ali, 1998). However, the challenging point is that different branches of Islam, as interpreted by a Muslim’s *imam*, or leader, may answer questions differently, such as, what is marooif, and what is munkar? What subjects should be encouraged and what subjects should not? Who has authority and who does not? Moreover, an Islamic state based on Shari’ah would use Hadith and Sunnah that match their politics; in other words, they politicize Shari’ah. Consequently, in Iran the two concepts—encouraging and avoiding order—are limited to women’s bodies—their hijabs; they would not apply to any social-justice issues.

In addition, such advice in the Qur’an is for all people, not for people in power to abuse others by policing them. Nowhere in Qur’an is it mentioned that it is the Prophet’s or the clergy’s responsibility only. Gradually, based on an orthodox understanding of Islam and the following of Shari’ah, it became the state’s agenda to control its own people. The state used the obligations of marooif and munkar to have the power to police, control, and marginalize people/women and limit their freedom. In contemporary Iran, *amr-bil-marooif* and *nahi-anil-munkar* are the main concern of the orthodox right-wing people, and they are supported by the supreme leader. Their main job is only to control women’s bodies through women’s modest way of wearing the hijab. Other issues, such as women’s rights, social injustice, inequality, economic corruption, and all related topics are ignored in this policing.

Prior to this new phase of controlling women’s bodies, there were different authorities called *gasht*, groups that inform on people—especially women, who do not behave modestly and wear the hijab. The *gasht*’s responsibilities were dictated by politics. For example, during the elections in Iran, when candidates needed the support of the people, they would be lenient to women who did not follow the rules and dress properly. However, when the elections were over, restrictions over women’s bodies were renewed. As I analyzed earlier, this is an example of using women’s presence as a tool in the construction of the state-nation relationship. The existence of women’s bodies became a focus for hostility and rejection.

Apparently, the power of the authorities was not sufficient in the eyes of some right-wing people and clerics, so they requested that parliament pass a rule to make all Iranians in Iran obliged to control women’s bodies through the wearing of the hijab. They also knew that there would be objections to such rules of restriction and policing, and so they wanted the agents of marooif and munkar to be protected by the government if there were a conflict with the people.

¹¹About 2,500 reformist women were rejected in the 2004 parliamentary election.

In addition, this law was to be enforced to the extent that if anyone were to oppose the agent of maroof and munkar, she or he would be punished to the greatest degree. This law was proposed in the parliament of Iran on June 18, 2014, and was passed on October 8, 2014.

Surprisingly, even before the law was passed, there is evidence that on June 22, 2014, a man warned a woman who was driving a car that she must take care to wear her hijab. The woman pulled the car over, got out, and started to remove her cloths in public in opposition to the man who had interfered with her way of dressing. In this case, this man was arrested and imprisoned. Cases such as this caused the right wing to request government protection to implement their policing over women's bodies. In addition, a harsh conservative member of the clergy in Esfahan, Iran, the city in which the acid attacks took place, repeatedly told the public that it was a great sin for women not to be properly veiled, and that not wearing the hijab is at the root of much of society's corruption; therefore, he told them, people who felt a responsibility must prevent women from not veiling themselves. Such a recommendation by a Friday imam in Esfahan gave the right wing power and the right of an orthodox Islamic man to interfere in women's freedom. As a result, they used acid to silence women's voices and restrict their presence for the rest of their lives. Finally, in October 2014, parliament passed a rule to protect the attackers of women's bodies; however, they said that women were only given verbal warnings, but in reality, no one could control the degree of this violence against women. Although this law required final approval from the top authorities, the right wing started to implement it, and the orthodox clergy defended it.

Among the discussions about the imposition of the new law over women, Majid Ansari, vice president of legal and parliamentary affairs, questioned the defender of the law, asking that if the other group wants to control women regarding their dress and behaviour, then what would be the role of the ministry of the country,¹² which is responsible for taking care of its citizens. He continued, asking how they could avoid this interference of power. The defender of the law, which is called *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, or supporters of the party of God, insisted that the other group would use motorcycles in the streets for this purpose, which would be more convenient, and in spite of any disagreement of the ministry.

Interestingly, the obligations of maroof and munkar, according to the law of Iran, should apply in nine different areas, including the imposition of Shari'ah, public modesty, family, social security, the black market, bribery, and public health, but Naghdi, the president of local Islamic police, the gasht, stated that the greatest importance of munkar is "having satellite and the influence of a foreign channel" (translated from Farsi by the author.) He continued, saying that such behaviour against people was revolting and at the root of all other repulsive acts that exist in the country. The local police, or ghashat, believe that they should use verbal tactics and not interfere physically and in the private spheres of people, meaning their homes. But in reality, physical violence against women happened in the city of Esfahan in October 2014.¹³

The History of the Acid Attack in Iran

The first acid attack happened in Iran in 1955, and three years later, the first punishment was ordered by civic law. The significant aspect of acid attacks is that they are usually done on an individual level and for the sake of a love relationship; that is, the attacker and the attacked one know each other. One agrees and the other does not, for any reason, so the attacker uses acid to prevent his or her loved one from having a good life in future. In other words, both parties know each other and know the reason for the attack.

In 2013, in the whole of the country of Iran, there were four cases reported, and in October 2014, in a short period of time in only one city, Esfahan, at least four cases were reported. There was no relationship between the attacker and the attacked women. No love relationship was reported. And apparently the purpose was only to create panic and fear in women. In all the attacks, the attackers (or attacker) drove motorcycles and wore helmets so they could not be recognized. The attacks happened in the early morning, when people go to work. As a consequence of the attacks, people in the capital city, Tehran, started to rally against the state and objected to this violence against women and their families.¹⁴ Opposition also connected this attack to the obligations of maroof and munkar, which gave protection to the attacker(s). Thus, violence against women became even more institutionalized as it was supported by parliament and orthodox Muslim groups.

¹²In Iran, this ministry is responsible for controlling citizens' well-being.

¹³<http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/oct/20/acid-attacks-isfahan-hijab-iran-young-women-motorbikes>

¹⁴Following such a rally, Mahdiah Gulroo, a young woman's rights activist was arrested and jailed. She was released on bail after three months. *Shahrvand Weekly News*. January 29, 2015, # 1527, p. 16.

Why Acid?

Violence against women comes in different shapes: physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual. In any of these forms, the attacker attempts to silence the attacked one and make her obedient. When the attacker uses acid, he wants not only to silence the woman but also to eliminate her from all private and public activities. He wants the woman to gradually suffer in pain with wounds, and without any remedy. It is not murdering the woman, in this case the woman no longer has a life. She is in constant pain and panic—a panic of being rejected by others because she does not have a face. Acid attacks are connected to the diminishing of a woman's beauty and identity. Psychologically, everyone, especially women, care about their beauty. People communicate with others through their faces and eyes, and with such extreme harassment, when a woman's face is spoiled and made ugly, her presence and her identity are under suspicion. Women in this situation are in a psychic coma. They are in a panic, afraid of everyone and everywhere, and in general of their whole lives. And as this panic expands through the entire society, other women begin to police themselves; they have to control themselves to avoid being injured, and, gradually, this self-policing inhabits society, and the whole population panics (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. n.d.; Lord, 1989). Through this process women gradually are marginalized in the society in which deprived of social activities. So, women's marginalization will not happen by itself, it is a dynamic and active policy and strategy by the autocratic state to misuse its power over women.

Sadly, a few months after the attack, a photograph taken in Esfahan shows a woman wearing a helmet to protect her face and head; she felt the only way to do this was to hide them. Was this really the effect that the conservative clergy in Iran was looking for? That women's bodies be hidden from men, and their presence be limited mainly to the home, and diminished in public? However, from another point of view, the photograph shows a woman demonstrating her resistance against violence to her body. Even when wearing a helmet for her safety, she is displaying her identity. In this way, women find their own strategies to combat patriarchy in Iran.

Women's Resistance, Women's Empowerment

After the acid attacks, the radical journalism in Iran publicized the attacks and questioned the law that was approved in parliament. Authorities did not notice that this violence would endanger their legitimacy as people in the capital, Tehran, started to rally against the law. Following such objections, the foreign news also covered the stories, and the authority was shocked and did not know how to control the tragedy. They were afraid for their public reputation, especially as they were in the process of solving their challenges with the United States and European countries, problems that had a 36-year-old history. So, firstly, they restricted journalists from reporting further news about this tragedy. Local journalists were arrested and jailed, and all of the sudden, all the news was stopped. Secondly, the authorities in the different media reported that there was no connection between the acid attacks and the law that had been passed in parliament. They tried to deny any connection between the maroof and munkar obligations and the attacker(s) and their victims. The cleric who had encouraged such violence was also marginalized in public and in rallies, and people questioned his eligibility to be an imam.¹⁵

There is a need to analyze the fact that since the victory of the Revolution in Iran, people's and women's rights were always a challenge between the authorities and the citizens. Many forms of violence took place, such as mass murder in 1988 for opposition to the regime and the Green Movement¹⁶ in 2009–2010, when, again, people who simply believed that the results of the election were untrue were arrested, jailed, raped, and killed. And as with all such murders, approval and permission to the state to employ such violence was given by the supreme leader. According to Shariati,¹⁷ the connection between politics, economics, and orthodox religion creates more corruption, eliminates people's rights, and leads to social injustice.

¹⁵A Friday imam is a person who is apparently the best cleric in their location regarding his knowledge, and his morality. In Iran, these imams are chosen by the supreme leader.

¹⁶The Green Movement was a movement against the presidential election in 2009. Many youths were arrested, raped, and killed. No one was accused of being the agent of the violence, and no authority acknowledged the murders.

¹⁷Ali Shariati was one of the prominent revolutionary Islamic intellectuals in the decade of 1960 to 1970. He died in England after being released from the jail in 1978, a year before the victory of the Revolution. His work focussed on the understanding of Islam and the Qur'an in a dynamic, just, and humanist way, and on unity, humanism, and love and the concept of identity. He was extremely opposed to the orthodox understanding of religion. He was also a critic of colonialism and its adherents (<http://www.shariati.com/kotob.html>).

One of the victims of the acid attack was a young woman from the family of a martyr of the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. Generally, people from this group might be a component of the state's power, or, if not, they would have been liberals because they had lost a loved one or had been injured in the war. The fact that this woman suffered the acid attack is evidence that there was no personal relationship between the attacker and the attacked person. None of the attackers were found or pursued by the government; it was the same as the tragedy of the Green Movement in 2009–2010.

Before the acid attacks, in unproven circumstances, a 19-year-old woman, Reyhaneh Jabbari, was imprisoned for seven years and then executed by hanging for killing a man, Morteza Abdolai Sarbandi, whom she claimed had tried to rape her. Although she pleaded guilty but stated she had done it in self-defence, she was not properly tried, and despite international pressure, the supreme leader would not intervene, and possibly because Sarbandi had once worked for the government, there was no retrial, and the case was closed. This shows that in Iran, as there is no social justice when a murder or other tragedies happens, the politicians can control the case, and in the end it is the people—and women—who are violated.

While I was writing this article, the law was going through its final approval, and on January 3, 2015, the people's resistance against the law and their objection to the acid attacks resulted, at the last stage, the rejection of the law. This shows the impact the action of Iranian women against the extremist line can have. However, it does not mean that people in the public or private spheres are free and safe as, following the acid attacks in Esfahan, four women were stabbed with a knife in Jahrom, a small city in southern Iran. The attacker was a member of a gasht group whose father was the chief of the local police in another region. He was proud of his actions and announced that he had followed the advice of the Friday imam, who had said that murdering improperly veiled women is a positive action because they are the source of sin.¹⁸

In conclusion, although extremists may use more physical violence against women, women, and people in general, counter it by their own agency. And even if the law is not confirmed, women still use their bodies to show their resistance. Even the way they use their hijabs is meaningful; it is a way of objecting to the autocratic state.

Solutions to Prevent Social Violence

Naraghi analyzes the roots of social violence in an individual violence effectively. (Naraghi, 2008). Society is a reflection of people's behaviour and attitude, as well as the state's power. One of the major characteristics of a modern society is the implantation of the law. Diversity in people's attitudes, beliefs, and religion should not impact the law, and everyone should be equal with regard to social justice. Although this framework is still regarded suspiciously, even in developed countries, to some degree, people's privacy and the way they dress, think, and live their lives is acceptable, and, if not, confronting them by people is prohibited. In other words, the law governs people, people do not govern other people. However, in developing societies, where people are not equal in the law, it is politics, class, certain branches of religion, and specific gender relationships that matter in social interactions.

In Iran, the law is not enforced in the society, and there is a great deal of discrimination in the application of Shari'ah over non-Muslims, even over the Sunni Muslims, women, and ethnic groups. When extremist conservatives connect their ideology to politics and the economy, they attain more power to enforce their ideology over people. And their conventional understanding of Islam (they justify their actions based on Hadith or their interpretation of the Qur'an and beyond, and they follow the supreme leader of Iran without any question) causes them to internalize an anger to such an extent that they can confront anyone who is not like them. These people can be members of ISIS, the Taliban, or any extremist group in Iran. In other words, their internal anger, when the circumstances are ready, manifests itself externally. So acid attacks, knife stabbings, rape in the Green Movement, the hanging of innocent people, or attacks such as the one on *Charlie Hebdo* can all be the result of such irrational, extremist perspectives.

I should also define violence and its circumstances here as a certain behaviour might be regarded as a violent action in one society but not in another. The definition of the word *violence* is relative; we have to consider the culture of a society, and then evaluate whether or not such behaviour is violent or not.

¹⁸This story was published in the *Iran Star*, December 4, 2014. Vol. 21, No. 1037, p. 37. <http://iranstar.com/issues/>

For example, an acid attack, or an attack with a knife, is certainly an act of violence; however, some Iranian politicians and orthodox find ways to justify this behaviour. And how can this happen in a society in which the leaders claim to be role models, and are regarded as true Muslims by the rest of the world?

People should be aware of such violence in all its dimensions and try to analyze its roots. Then they should counter it; violence brings more violence. Iranians should become more tolerant; acceptance creates a space for dialogue. This is a notion that is hidden in that society. Dialogue creates more room to communicate, to engage, to exchange ideas, and to increase one's acceptance towards those in opposition.

Beyond the above notions, Iran as a country needs to modernize with regard to the establishment of laws and their implementation, regardless of any variations. Implementing Shari'ah, which is not a standard and acceptable law, is violence against people's rights. Another factor in creating a modern society is the use of rationalism and to face opposition in a civilized way. Iranians should behave logically and rationally in social disagreement. Attacking women for controlling their own bodies only increases anger, violence, and insolence in society. We are aware, even in the West, that the way we dress is an issue; for example, dress codes for the workplace and school are different from those for going to a club, the beach, or a shopping centre. In the West, there is also a difference between public and private spaces regarding what people should or should not do—where they can drink, smoke, and do other activities. These rules are laid out in the law, and people understand and follow them. Constitutional law controls people and the way they communicate. People are free to behave in certain ways in their private spheres, such as the way they dress or what they drink, but they are not allowed to bother their neighbours or endanger public safety. If any unacceptable behaviour happens, the law should be enforced on the people it is not up to the people to control and punish each other.

The Islamic State of Iran needs to respect its own citizens. It should not interfere with their public and private lives, and it should be firm in implementing just laws, regardless of a person's beliefs, religion, ethnicity, or gender.

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