Women and Islamic Fundamentalism

116 Zand Dokht, “THE REVOLUTION THAT FAILED WOMEN”

Although the Pahlavi rulers of Iran, Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941) and Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979), gave women political rights, allowed them to abandon the veil for Western-style dress, and encouraged female literacy and higher education, in the 1970s millions of Iranian women shared the growing disgust with the Pahlavi government’s autocracy, corruption, and secularism. Women played an important role in the massive demonstrations that preceded Reza Shah’s downfall in 1979 and led to his replacement by an Islamic fundamentalist regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989). True to its Islamic principles, Khomeini’s government quickly revoked Pahlavi legislation concerning women and the family and reinstated traditional Islamic practices.

Iranian women who had taken advantage of educational opportunities and had benefited professionally during the Pahlavi years opposed the Islamic republic’s effort to turn back the clock. In 1979 representatives from various women’s organizations founded the Women’s Solidarity Committee, an organization dedicated to the protection of women’s rights in Iran. Although subsequently banned in Iran itself, Iranian women in England maintained a branch of the organization in London. Known as the Iranian Women’s Solidarity Group, in the 1980s it published pamphlets and newsletters on issues pertaining to women in Iran. The following selection, written by a Solidarity Committee member, Zand Dokht, appeared in one of its publications in 1981.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. In what specific ways did the Islamic Revolution in Iran affect women?
2. According to the author, how do Iran’s new leaders envision a woman’s role in society?
3. How does the author explain the fact that so many Iranian women supported the revolution that toppled the shah?
4. Why, in the author’s view, did the shah’s reforms fail to satisfy numerous Iranian women?

When Khomeini created his Islamic Republic in 1979, he relied on the institution of the family, on support from the women, the merchants, and the private system of landownership. The new Islamic constitution declared women’s primary position as mothers. The black veil, symbol of the position of women under Islam, was made compulsory. Guards were posted outside government offices to enforce it, and women were sacked from their jobs without compensation for refusing to wear the veil. The chairman of the Employment Office, in an interview with the
government’s women’s magazine said, “We can account for 100,000 women government employees being sacked as they resisted the order of the revolutionary government when it was demanded of them to put the veil on.”

Schools were segregated, which meant that women were barred from some technical schools, even from some religious schools, and young girls’ education in the villages was halted. Lowering the marriage age for girls to 13, reinstating polygamy and Sighar (temporary wives), the two major pillars of Islam, meant that women did not need education and jobs, they only needed to find husbands.

The Ayatollahs in their numerous public prayers, which grew to be the only possible national activity, continuously gave sermons on the advantages of marriage, family, and children being brought up on their mother’s lap. They preached that society would be pure, trouble free, criminal-less (look at the youth problem in the West) if everybody married young, and if men married as many times as possible (to save the unprocreated women who might otherwise become prostitutes). The government created a marriage bank at a time when half the working population was unemployed, whereby men were given huge sums — around £3,300 — to get married. Another masterpiece of the revolutionary Islamic government was to create a system of arranged marriages in prisons, between men and women prisoners, to “protect” women after they leave prison.

Because abortion and contraception are now unobtainable, marriage means frequent pregnancy. If you are 13 when you get married, it is likely that you will have six children by the time you are 20. This, in a country where half the total population are already under 16, is a tragedy for future generations.

Religious morality demands that all pleasures and entertainments be banned. Wine, music, dancing, chess, women’s parts in theater, cinema, and television — you name it, Khomeini banned it. He even segregated the mountains and the sea, for men and female climbers and swimmers. Islamic virtues and spiritual values while drawing from their own experiences in the West. They said it was cold and lonely. Western women were only in pursuit of careers and self-sufficiency, and that their polygamous sexual relationships had not brought them liberation, but confusion and exploitation. These women joined ranks with an already growing force of Muslim women, to retrieve the tradition of true/happy Muslim women — in defense of patriarchy.

The mosque is not just a place of prayer, it is also a social club for women. It provides a warm, safe room for women to meet, chat, or listen to a sermon, and there are traditional women-only parties and picnics in gardens or holy places. Take away these traditional and religious customs from women as the Shah — with his capitalist and imperialist reforms, irrelevant to women’s needs — tried to do and a huge vacuum is left. Khomeini stepped in to fill that vacuum. The reason why Khomeini won was that the Shah’s social-economic program for women was dictatorial, bureaucratic, inadequate (especially in terms of health education) and therefore irrelevant to women’s needs. What little the Shah’s reform brought to women was just a token gesture. Women dissatisfied with the Shah’s reform felt that they had benefited little from him and would not miss it if it was taken away.