

11 Birth control, female sexual awakening, and the gay lifestyle

In *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault argues that beneath a variety of sexual prohibitions of seventeenth-century European societies a “veritable discursive explosion” around sexuality could be discerned ([1976] 1980, 17). At the end of the eighteenth century, sexual regulations had become ingrained in legislative discourse, and state intervention addressed numerous issues concerning sexual conduct, among them the legal age of marriage, the birth rate, fertility, and the frequency of sexual relations. Through its economic, legal, medical, and health policies, the modern state influenced the sexual conduct of its population in new ways, resulting in dramatic demographic changes. By the nineteenth century, a broader discourse on sexuality was taking shape beneath the blanket of Victorian morality. It was nothing less than “an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy” (Foucault [1976] 1980, 23). Foucault’s interpretation of course contradicted the common assumption of an absence of discussion of sexuality in the nineteenth century and a presumed “Victorian morality,” followed by greater sexual freedom in the twentieth century.

Considered alongside trends concerning gender and sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran, Foucault’s portrait of sexuality in the Victorian era offers valuable insights. Foucault can shed light on the repercussions of the new sexual austerities that were imposed after the revolution. In the 1980s the Islamist government instituted a dramatic reversal in human rights, especially regarding women’s rights. The state revived premodern social conventions (repudiation, veiling, flogging) but enforced them through modern means and institutions, which meant a wider application. In its system of distributive justice, Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women received different treatment before the law. Defunct and suppressive Shi’i rituals of purity and penance were brought back, while polygamy and sex with underage girls were newly sanctioned. Openly gay men were severely punished, even executed.

However, the popular notion that Islamism has enforced a harsh form of sexual repression on the Iranian people does not convey the complexity of what has taken place. There have been significant improvements in women's education and health along with a remarkable drop in birth rates. How can such important reforms, which have many positive implications for women, coexist with harshly misogynistic laws and policies? Part of the answer is that before the revolution Iranian women had already made significant advances in these areas. But the other part is that the policies of the Islamist government cannot easily be categorized as "puritanical" or "moralistic." Rather, using Foucault's framework, we can argue that various factions within the state actively deployed a new "sexual economy" for the population. Sometimes, the Islamist state privileged patriarchal interpretations of gender norms over more modern ones. At times, it adopted modern projects alongside a discourse that presented them as practices indigenous to traditional Islam. In all cases, the state used modern institutions to disseminate these various discourses.

Studies of birth control and family planning in the United States provide us with yet another vantage point from which to examine the unintended results of family planning in Iran. As a result of industrialization, urbanization, and the adoption of contraceptive technologies, American society by the mid-twentieth century had experienced a profound change in its sexual mores (Burgess and Wallin 1954). As people began to live longer and fertility rates dropped, marriage became more than an institution for procreation. Women's demands for emotional and sexual intimacy increased. The emphasis on romantic, (hetero)sexual love led to new forms of normative heterosexuality. Good sex in marriage became important, and romantic love seemed necessary to a good marriage. After Margaret Sanger and the Planned Parenthood Federation initiated the birth-control movement in the United States, many sectors of society gradually set aside their opposition and embraced such ideas. Most Protestant churches and Jewish organizations (and many individual Catholics) approved of contraception, hoping thereby to strengthen the bonds of marriage (Gordon 1990; Neuhaus 2000; D'Emilio and Freedman 1997). Attitudes toward premarital sex also changed, with sex outside marriage becoming more acceptable. Widespread use of contraceptives helped make marriage a more companionate union. While this type of marriage involved a division of labor between breadwinner and homemaker, it was in some respects a more egalitarian and less patriarchal relationship than before (Amato *et al.* 2007). In addition, by separating sexual activity from procreation, "birth control proponents opened the door for non-reproductive relationships ranging from childless marriages to casual encounters to non-heterosexual relationships" (Ball 2005, 23).

As women became more sexually assertive, they also became less tolerant of men's extramarital affairs, both heterosexual and homosexual.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the United States had moved further toward what could be called "individualistic marriages." In this third phase in the evolution of Western marriage, romantic love retained its importance, but the partners had also to fulfill each others' psychological, and often occupational, needs (Amato *et al.* 2007, 16). Occupational compatibility became a central aspect of psychological and emotional compatibility in an advanced capitalist order in which a majority of women not only had to but wanted to work. According to a forthcoming book by Stephanie Coontz, the increase in women's economic independence in the 1970s and 1980s initially led to a rise in divorce rates, not because women's work and education created more bad marriages, but because they encouraged women to raise their expectations of fairness in marriage and gave them more resources to leave bad marriages. But as men and women adjusted to women's new bargaining power in and out of marriage, husbands and wives began to communicate better, spend more quality time together, and develop deeper emotional ties, leading to more satisfying marriages and sex lives for both partners. This helps explain why divorce rates in the United States have declined significantly for college-educated couples since the late 1980s, much more significantly than for less-educated or lower-income couples. The right to divorce also led to lower rates of female suicide and domestic violence and contributed to more compatible unions among those who remained married.¹

Better heterosexual sex altered perceptions about other types of relationships. Many came to believe that women had a right to enjoy sex, whether inside or outside marriage, whether in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, and neither should be covert any longer. Soon a more vocal gay movement followed, one that fought against the hetero-normative social and legal institutions of American society and gained new rights for gays and lesbians. Although it suffered some setbacks during the early years of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, by the early twenty-first century it was achieving numerous political victories.

In Iran too, as the birth rate dropped, life expectancy increased, and changing gender norms saturated society through the international media; women's expectations of marriage shifted as well. Iranians had practiced arranged marriages for centuries, with less normative weight given to romantic love. During the Pahlavi era, companionate marriages gradually gained ground among the elite and the new urban middle

¹ I am grateful to Coontz, author of *Marriage and History*, for her helpful e-mail exchange of April 3, 2007; see also Cowen 2007.

classes. Nonetheless, parents still played a key role in introducing prospective couples, approving marriages, and negotiating dowry and *mahr-riyeh*. In the 1980s leftist and Islamist party leaders adopted parental roles and were expected to give their consent before a couple could marry.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, in urban and even rural communities, strictly arranged marriages and endogamous marriages (within kinship groups) became less common. Although daughters still needed their fathers' legal permission to marry in the Islamic Republic, at other levels the enforcement of Islamist strictures had slackened. Marriage was seen less and less as merely an institution for procreation, and women had come to expect intimacy and spontaneity along with a greater degree of emotional and sexual closeness. Moreover, the mean age of marriage for girls had gone up, and dating had become a more acceptable part of life. In a comparative study of Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, Mansoor Moaddel reported a significant shift in attitudes toward marriage in urban Iranian society between 2000 and 2005. In a 2000 survey, 41 percent of respondents considered parental approval essential for marriage, but by 2005 this had decreased to 24 percent. Moreover, by 2005, nearly 70 percent of respondents favored personal choice in spouse selection, and of these, 50 percent declared love to be more important than parental approval, though most still sought their parents' approval for love marriages (Moaddel 2008, 9).

In urban and northern rural communities, young men and women formed friendships on the streets, at the universities, and in the workplace, often with the intention of getting married. This occurred, even though the Islamist state had established many prohibitions against the mingling of unmarried men and women. After about a year of such semi-secret dating, a young man might go to the father's house and ask for his daughter's hand. Parents still helped their sons and daughters with the cost of a new home and regarded this as their responsibility. In part, this was because renting an ordinary two-bedroom apartment in Tehran, for example, required an exorbitant down payment, plus a monthly rent of \$600 in 2007.² The idea of unmarried cohabitation had also gained limited social acceptance in the capital city, in spite of its nominal illegality, while Valentine's Day had become a big day of celebration, much to the consternation of the government.

In addition to covert homosexuality in many social sectors, especially sex-segregated high schools, within Tehran's educated and cosmopolitan population a small, clandestine, gay subculture had also emerged, along

² Special thanks to Mahsa Shekarloo, Farah Ghadernia, Hassan Mortazari, and Samira N. for the helpful information they provided for this section.

with cyberspace publications in Persian that advocated a modern gay and lesbian lifestyle. Iran's gay and lesbian community desired legal recognition of homosexuality by the public and the state, as well as more egalitarianism within relationships.

Meanwhile surging rates of unemployment and rising expectations concerning marriage had led to dramatic increases in the number of runaways, prostitutes, drug addicts, and suicides among young Iranian women. Many women complained of domestic violence and their husbands' extramarital affairs and wanted a way out. These upheavals unleashed new anxieties about the changing sexual mores of the country. This chapter explores the link between politics and the shifting gender roles in this third generation since the Iranian revolution.

Women, the politics of reform, and the discourse of human rights

In the mid-1990s, the battles for a more tolerant society were fought in numerous and sometimes unlikely sites. Iranian journalists, lawyers, clerics, doctors and nurses, fashion designers, actors and film directors, college students, literary writers, and homemakers became activists in the reform movement. Reformists came from many different social and religious orientations, including both secular and moderate Muslims. Some were leftist Islamists who had participated in the revolution, fought in the war, or had relatives who were martyred. Many had contributed to literacy and health campaigns. Such early supporters of the theocratic state, including women who had suffered the loss of loved ones in the war, were by now increasingly dissatisfied with corrupt policies of the state and felt abandoned by it. Most reformist intellectuals went through a dramatic ideological transformation that was influenced further by the collapse of the Eastern European and Soviet systems. Veteran Islamists and more secular dissidents gradually reached a fragile truce in order to unite provisionally in a common cause. These organizations were reinforced by the increasing numbers of youth raised on satellite television and the Internet who resented the excesses of the theocratic state and its morality police. Reformists argued that opposition to the shah and Western domination had been only one dimension of the revolutionary agenda. Issues of more importance were the creation of a viable democracy and a new interpretation of Islam compatible with the requirements of modern life.

The May 1997 election of Muhammad Khatami as president strengthened the voices of women's rights advocates, who supported his run for office (Fig. 11.1). Khatami was one of four candidates who had been vetted by the Council of Guardians and allowed to run for office shortly before the

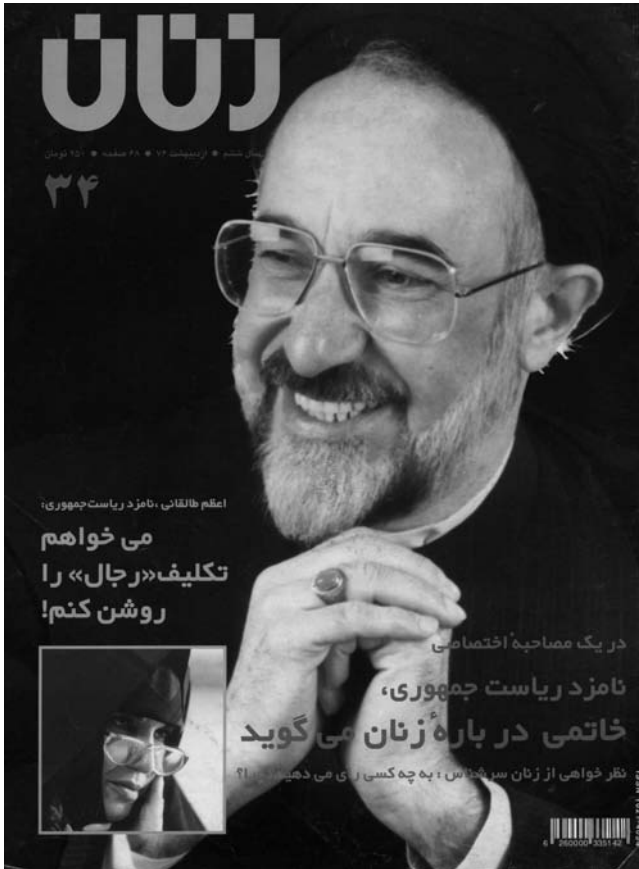


Figure 11.1 President Muhammad Khatami, 1997

elections, in order to give a greater semblance of democracy to the process. Although Khatami was not expected to win, much of the public embraced his platform, which was dedicated to curbing censorship, fighting fanaticism, and increasing tolerance on social and cultural issues. Of 33 million eligible voters, 29 million (88 percent) voted, an unprecedented turnout for an Iranian election. Twenty million votes (70 percent) went to Khatami, who did equally well in cities and in villages. Word-of-mouth indicated that Khatami would adopt a more liberal stance on gender relations, which brought women and young people out to vote for him in overwhelming numbers. He was reelected in June of 2001 with close to 76 percent of the vote, despite his limited success in carrying out his program in the face of resistance on the part of entrenched hard-liners.

In 1999, more than 7,000 women ran as candidates in the first nationwide local elections under the Islamic Republic. In twenty cities these women candidates placed first in contests for council leadership positions, and in fifty-eight cities they took second place. A total of 784 women (about 11 percent of the national total), many in remote locations, were elected. In the 2003 elections, this number increased to about 1,400 in the councils.³ The February 2000 elections brought a new generation of deputies to the Sixth Islamic Parliament (2000–2004), giving reformists a clear majority. Many deputies assumed they could simply reinstate greater social freedoms, changing the Islamist regime through legal, parliamentary means. Between 2000 and 2004, the reformists who dominated the presidency, the Parliament and the provincial and city councils, attempted to liberalize the system. One important organ that heavily campaigned for women's rights was the Center for women's Participation (Markaz-e Mosharekat-e Zanan), which was affiliated with the Office of the President. The Center was established under President Hashemi Rafsanjani, but played a more active role in the Khatami era. Under Khatami, its new director Zahra Shojai held cabinet rank as advisor to the president. Khatami appointed another woman, Masumeh Ebtekar, Vice President for environmental and women's issues. Women deputies also organized a caucus and introduced a series of laws pertaining to the rights of women and girls, managing to pass a few of them. The Parliament raised the legal age of marriage for girls from nine to fifteen, but the all-powerful Council of Guardians disagreed, and it was eventually set at thirteen. Women gained some rights to initiate divorce and Parliament exempted women's *mahriyeh* from taxes. Single women received permission to study abroad on government fellowships. Reformists also managed to reduce the severity of the *hijab* for children and high-school students by allowing more colorful uniforms and scarves (Ebrahimi 2001; Mohri 2003; Tariqi 2004; Madani-Ghahfarokhi 2005; Koolae 2006).

President Khatami supported these efforts, including ones that would have equalized women's inheritance rights and given them greater divorce rights. But the right to inheritance and several other bills were either rejected or severely revised by the Supreme Leader, the Council of Guardians, and the Expediency Council. The latter is a tribunal that arbitrates between the Parliament and the Council of Guardians, usually siding with the Council of Guardians. More ambitious projects, such as calls for the adoption of the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which the

³ Information from Mehrangiz Kar and e-mail from Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud of August 23, 2007.

Khatami government had helped introduce, were ratified – with some reservations – by a parliamentary majority.

Fierce opposition to the CEDAW developed in Qom, where Islamist men and women held demonstrations against the new law. Conservative clerics declared that joining CEDAW would amount to “a declaration of war against Islam.” Another accusation was that the CEDAW represented a perverted “Western sexual ethos and prostitution” that would result in the creation of mixed bathhouses. Eventually, the Council of Guardians rejected the proposed law on the grounds that it conflicted with several principles of the constitution and Islam, including inheritance and divorce laws, the *hijab*, and polygamy (“Iranian Leader” 2000).

Despite strong public support and enthusiasm, the Khatami era, which benefited from a period of high oil prices in the international market, did not succeed in overhauling the Islamist state, though it did provide greater opportunities for cultural expression and political criticism (Nomani and Behdad 2006, 211). Moreover, the reformers faced repression at every step, since the police and the legal system remained under the control of the Supreme Leader, as did military and foreign affairs. One result was that between 1997 and 2004, more than a hundred newspapers were closed down, and the state targeted political dissidents, journalists, and even some reform politicians. Many were arrested, murdered, or forced into exile, including a generation of student activists who held dramatic prodemocracy demonstrations in Iranian universities in 1999.

When many reformists were disqualified by the Council of Guardians, disillusioned voters stayed away from the polls and conservatives were elected to the Seventh Islamic Parliament (2004–2008). The new MPs halted the debate on the CEDAW and many other progressive gender reforms (Nazila Fathi 2004). Among them were large numbers of Basij and Pasdaran, whose ascendancy to the top decision-making institutions marked a new stage in Iranian politics. Women deputies affiliated with the Basij and with close ties to the rural sectors promoted a few progressive measures, such as reinstating abortion to save the life of the mother and the appointment of women judges in an advisory capacity. However, for the most part they supported the new conservative agenda (Koolae 2006).

The reformists were further weakened when US President George W. Bush included Iran in his “Axis of Evil” in a 2002 speech, and suggested that the United States might invade Iran. The powerlessness of the reformists in the face of these foreign and domestic challenges led to widespread public disillusionment. Following a decade of reformist control in the provincial councils, the Parliament, and the presidency, the 2005 presidential elections brought to power Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative populist and former member of the Pasdaran. The presidency, the Parliament, and

the provincial and city councils were now in the hands of a new generation of populist conservatives, many of them veterans of the Iran–Iraq War.

The decision of nearly 20 million disillusioned pro-reformist voters to boycott the elections, voting fraud engineered by the office of the Supreme Leader, and the zeal with which the Basij got out the vote certainly helped bring Ahmadinejad to power (Hourcade 2006, 10–11). Various reports estimate that by 2005 there were at least 8 million “card-carrying” Basijis: 3 million active members (trained at military camps and used in domestic repression) and 5 million inactive members (individuals who received handouts and could be mobilized at election times).⁴ Those who voted for Ahmadinejad did so out of Basiji loyalty and support for his economic agenda. They were moved by his piety, his promises of social justice, and his opposition to the pro-market economic liberalization proposals of his rival, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, plans which would have ended many government subsidies.

Ahmadinejad’s election also expressed a backlash against the sexual revolution taking place in Iran. I was in Tehran just before the election and was amazed by the range of negative comments on the streets and in social gatherings about women’s supposedly scandalous behavior. Many men, including young working-class men bitterly opposed to the government, nonetheless expressed outrage over young women’s presumed sexual promiscuity and at the sight of girls and boys walking in the streets with clasped hands. In such conversations, public criticisms of the economy were almost always tied into stories of young women selling their bodies to Arab Sheikhs (and not Iranian clients) in the Persian Gulf to raise money for their dowries and support their families. As journalist Christopher de Bellaigue reported at the time, many of Ahmadinejad’s supporters were deeply concerned with the “dramatic rise in prostitution, marital infidelities, and drug addiction,” which they blamed on reformist social and cultural policies (Bellaigue 2005, 20). They remembered that, as mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad had arranged low-interest loans for newly married couples, thus encouraging the institution of marriage. As a presidential candidate, he promised not only to reduce the staggering unemployment rate but also to provide more generous financial support for young couples (Fathi 2005).

Supporters of Ahmadinejad tapped into these feelings by distributing a documentary film by director Massoud Dehnamaki (a former Basiji) entitled *Prostitution and Poverty* (2002). The film was aimed at poor urban and rural supporters of the state. It featured a series of interviews

⁴ According to Basij Commander Mohammad Hejazi the number was closer to 11 million in 2005 (“Niruyeh Moghavemat” 2006). Political scientist Farideh Farhi suggested a figure closer to 8 million (Farhi, e-mail, February 9, 2007).

with poor urban women who had entered the sex trade in the Persian Gulf, often for a limited period. Some saved up to help desperate family members or to raise a respectable *jahiziyeh* to get married. These clever manipulations of social and cultural grievances, which played on Iranian prejudices against Arabs, contributed to the defeat of the reform movement.

The culture wars continue

Despite these political setbacks, feminist discourses continued to permeate higher education, the arts, and other cultural arenas. In 2005, women, who did exceedingly well in the *concours* entrance exams, made up 65 percent of first-year students at state colleges and universities in Iran. The field of women's studies found its way into the universities and into women's periodical literature. By 2005, there were also more than 100 publishing houses that catered to women (Dokouhaki 2005, 20). In a steady stream of new books and articles, feminist writers questioned and criticized major male political figures of the twentieth century for their limited perspectives on gender. A heated debate arose over the Western concepts of cultural relativism and universalism, accompanied by attempts to combine and reconcile the best arguments from both perspectives. Some Iranian feminists tacitly called for the recognition of gay and lesbian lifestyles on the grounds that gender and sexuality are socially constructed (Sherkat 1998, 2–4).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, and with the emergence of a “third generation” of dissident youth, Iranian feminism had also redefined itself. The first generation resisted the shah and started the revolution. The second one endured the harsh early days of the Islamic Republic and the war. This third generation grew up in the reform era and was not only more confident, but seemed determined to confront the state. For this generation, fashion was a feminist tool. In contrast to the revolutionary generation comprised of leftist radicals, or Islamists who abhorred bourgeois decadence, young urban women engaged in a constant struggle with the morality police by wearing makeup, painting their toe nails red, and streaking their bangs in vibrant colors. Before the eyes of the clerics and the morality police, they announced their claim to the streets and other public spaces by wearing form-fitting slacks and short, elegant *manteaux*. While these garments met the minimum standards laid down by the morality police, they were as far as possible from the normative drab black veils.

This third generation also reclaimed Muharram for itself, even as it participated in state-sponsored religious festivals. Their Muharram did

not just stress atonement, repentance, or rituals revolving around the war. This Muharram also challenged the austere sexual conventions of the Islamic Republic, as young women donned fashionable black clothing, lots of makeup, and matching black nail polish and lipstick. Girls and boys flocked to "Hussein Parties" in public squares and listened to rhythmic renditions of Muharram music. Women held candlelit vigils while quietly distributing slips of paper with their phone numbers to men in the crowd who caught their fancy (Nasser 2006; Moaveni 2005, 56–59).

Competitive sports provided another venue for women's rights advocates. By 2004, the number of women athletes was estimated at more than 1.2 million. They received training from 32,000 women coaches in 10,000 public and private sports centers (Dokouhaki 2005, 20). Women often cross-dressed in order to attend sporting events with male friends, despite the continuing ban on women's attendance at soccer stadiums. Occasionally, the democratic opposition was able to express itself in sports stadiums. In September 2001, fans at two stadiums publicly expressed their contempt for the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center in the United States by observing a spontaneous moment of silence in memory of the victims and chanting "America, Condolences" (e-mail from M. Amir Ebrahimi, August 31, 2007).

The Internet offered another sphere for new developments in gender relations. Persian bloggers numbered in the hundreds of thousands, making Persian one of the most popular languages in cyberspace. The Internet became a medium for dating and matchmaking. Local sources reported that an unmarried woman teacher from the restrictive city of Qom might set up a date with a man from the province of Qazvin and arrange to meet at one of the more elegant cafés of Tehran. The Internet also served as a forum for jumpstarting a new feminist movement. When a March 8 International Women's Day celebration and subsequent peaceful demonstrations became the target of club-wielding police and militia, feminists changed tactics. In Spring 2005, in an unprecedented move, a number of feminist groups formed a broad coalition to protest women's inequality in the constitution and held a rally with over 6,000 people. A year later, despite escalating state persecution, noted feminists Shirin Ebadi, Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, Parvin Ardalan (winner of the 2007 Olof Palme Award) along with others signed a petition calling for the repeal of discriminatory marriage and divorce laws. Soon, thousands of young women in their teens and early twenties had joined the grassroots One Million Signatures Campaign, also known as Campaign for Equality, which spread rapidly throughout the nation through the Internet; its influence was apparent in both big cities and small towns. As of this writing, activists quietly continue to go door to door to explain the



Figure 11.2 Parvin Ardalan

deficiencies of the laws to ordinary women, collect signatures, and plan to submit them to the upcoming Eighth Parliament in 2008 (Ahmadi-Khorasani 2007a; Casey 2007) (Figs. 11.2, 11.3).

Iranian cinema, which has gained increasing levels of world recognition, has also helped to redefine gender roles (Fig. 11.4). Female filmmakers Tahmineh Milani (*Hidden Half*, 2001; *Unwanted Woman*, 2005), Rakhshan Bani E'temad (*Under the Skin of the City*, 2001; *Gilaneh*, 2005), Samira Makhmalbaf (*The Apple*, 1998), and their male colleagues, such as Bahram Beyza'i (*Bashu: The Little Stranger*, 1988), Dariyush Mehrjui (*Leila*, 1997), Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Nights of Zayandehrood*, 1991; *Gabbeh*, 1995), Ja'far Panahi (*The Circle*, 2000), Majid Majidi (*The Color of Paradise*, 1999), and Kambuzia Partovi (*Café Transit*, 2005) subjected Iranian and Islamic patriarchal cultures to critical treatment. Their films



Figure 11.3 Women's rights demonstration, Tehran, 2006. Simin Behbahani (left), Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani (right)

explore various themes concerning marriage, among them women's desire to be loved and respected in relationships, polygamy, repudiation, and physical and emotional violence against women and children (Naficy 2001; Tapper 2002).

In contrast to the romantic films of the 1970s, wherein a loving marriage ultimately solved all problems, the new Iranian cinema offered critical perspectives on marriage, often singling out incompetent, abusive, and uncaring male heads of household. Nationalists of the 1930s had called upon mothers to raise patriotic children, and Islamists in the 1970s and 1980s asked them to give martyrs. In the 1990s, women turned their backs on these political appropriations of motherhood. The new Iranian cinema suggested that women should protect children (boys and girls) from abusive fathers, the ravages of war, the market, and the state (*Bashu*, *Sara*, *The Color of Paradise*, *The Circle*, *Gileva*). These films called attention to women's nurturing role and the social consequences of its absence, and criticized the patriarchal prerogative of institutional marriages that empowered the paternal mother-in-law, and the division of labor in more traditional marriages. But they also called attention to the fragility of more individualistic, romantic marriages.

Feminist intellectuals reexamined the traditional images of peasant and working-class women in popular media, including novels, short stories,

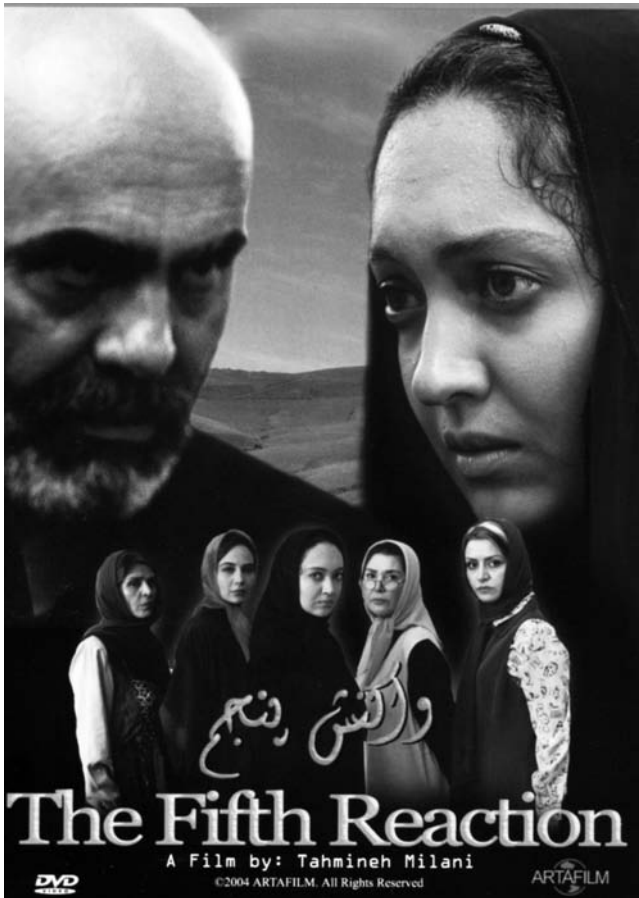


Figure 11.4 Film poster

and documentaries. In the leftist literature of the 1970s, the female peasant was an asexual being whose concerns were confined to work, poverty, health, infant mortality, and the struggle against the bourgeoisie. By the 1990s, this cardboard image of the heroic, peasant or working-class woman was being rewritten. The new literature explored sexual desire and sexual violence across social classes, the infidelities of married men, violence in the home, illegal abortions, and the dogmatism of the old leftist organizations. These observable shifts in gender representation stemmed from the public's new attitudes toward marriage, family planning, religion, and social hierarchies.

Urban youth and premarital sex

In Tehran and a few other major cities, the difference between indoor and outdoor social lives among middle- and upper-class urbanites could not have been more extreme. In public, young women observed the *hijab* requirements, followed the rules of modesty, and averted their glances. Behind closed doors, however, they lived unrestrained sexual lives that stunned even visiting cousins from Los Angeles. Since outdoor forms of recreation were extremely limited, most socializing happened in private residences. Parents were often complicit in these trysts. A young man's parents might be in the house when their son invited his girlfriend over. Many middle- and upper-class parents with secular dispositions tolerated this kind of behavior because at home they could shelter their children from the morality police, who could jail and torture transgressors very easily. Outside the home, young people attended parties at friends' houses where casual sex and drug use were common practice. Some of these young women and men belonged to the more modern sectors of society dating from the pre-revolutionary period. They had culturally sophisticated parents who became economically disadvantaged as a result of the revolution. Others belonged to the tradition-bound *bazaari* and clerical classes, whose fortunes have grown markedly since the revolution. They moved into posh condominiums and houses equipped with the latest American gadgets and electronic devices, with ready access to global television and other media networks.

Pardis Mahdavi's fieldwork on these urban populations across several Iranian cities reported that many unmarried youth – in her snowball sample of about eighty young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five – had experienced premarital or extramarital sex. Dating often began in cyberspace and quickly led to sex. However, very few of those who engaged in risky sexual behaviors (whether heterosexual or homosexual) used condoms or even oral contraceptives. The women were too shy to purchase prophylactics from the local pharmacy, and the men were simply too careless. Most believed they were not at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS (Mahdavi 2007b).

One of my friends in Tehran, a history instructor at a local college, believes that the growing numbers of unhappy marriages and divorces have contributed to a sexual revolution, one in which many of her students have participated:

The rise in divorce rates stems from a variety of reasons: economic and cultural factors, women's greater awareness of their rights, their education, and their employment, which has reduced their dependence on men. For these reasons, many women no longer see marriage as a means to reach their hopes and ideals in

life. They no longer regard sex as an obligation in marriage, but a form of pleasure for themselves. Hence they no longer find it necessary to preserve their virginity. Those who must be virgins to get married undergo hymenoplasty. There are many doctors who perform this expensive operation.⁵

Hymenoplasty today is somewhat more sophisticated than the hymen-repair procedure Dr. Polak described in 1865. The modern operation includes the use of gelatin capsules containing red dye that will rupture during nuptial intercourse, simulating the physical markers of virginal sexual experience. Hymenoplasty and various forms of vaginal reconstruction seem to be popular operations throughout the Middle East and even among expatriates in the United States and Europe, since they are advertised widely on the Internet.⁶ Simpler methods of simulating virginity are also available. Some women regulate their menses by taking pills to coordinate their period with their wedding night. Iranian men are well aware of these changes and tricks, often joking that there are no real virgins left in Tehran and the other big cities. Feminists are divided on the merits of hymenoplasty. Some believe it reinforces existing power relations and affirms the patriarchal order, but Fataneh Farahani suggests that the increasing numbers of women who choose such operations might eventually diminish the significance of virginity:

The very rising of the hymenoplasty operation, and other tactics, in all probability, renders it impossible to distinguish between “the real virgin” and the “remade virgin.” In these circumstances, the growing number of “false virgins,” therefore, cast a shadow of distrust on all the women who appear to be “real” virgins. (Farahani 2007, 91)

Today more than ever it seems young women are “performing virginity.” They engage in non-vaginal heterosexual intercourse or same-sex relationships. If they are not virgins on their wedding nights, women can simulate virginity. Most fake inexperience in sexual matters, proving that virginity has become a “social and cultural construct, rather than a biological truth” of ideal womanhood (Farahani 2007, 90).

The politics of birth control

While young unmarried urbanites engage in risky sex, the married population has relatively easy access to birth control. Soon after taking power

⁵ Interview with an anonymous informant, February 8, 2007.

⁶ See for example www.labiadoctor.com/hymenoplasty.html. For more information on this relatively common procedure see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hymenorrhaphy>.

in 1979 the state instituted its own religious sex education, which served a different function. Rather than censoring all discussion of sex, the state initially took a more traditionalist stance, banning only progressive discussions of sex influenced by Western discourses. Shi'i *'ulama* pride themselves on adhering to the notion that "there is no shame in [discussing] religious matters" (*la haya fi din*). The religious manuals of the clerics, with their detailed instructions on proper sexual conduct and on the rituals and purification required after sex, became mandatory reading in school. During religious instruction in public schools, teachers spent a great deal of time describing proper procedures for ablution of the genitals and restoration of *taharat*. Instructors provided students with information about the anatomical and biological differences between men and women (menstruation, ejaculation, childbirth, etc.) from a religious perspective. Similar information was disseminated in neighborhood mosques and prayer sessions. Discussions of issues such as masturbation (viewed as reprehensible), vaginal discharge, and nocturnal discharge focused on avoiding ritual pollution before prayer (Drew 1997). In these manuals, *shahvat* (sexual desire) and interest in *jema'* (intercourse) were seen as much stronger in women than in men. But women's *haya* (modesty) and men's *gheyrat* (honor) controlled excessive female desire (Mir-Hosseini 2004, 206). A high-school teacher from Qom recalls that children constantly asked for definitions and explanations of words like *sodomy*, *bestiality*, and a variety of other forms of sexual conduct they encountered in these religious manuals of sexual etiquette, demands that placed their parents and teachers in an awkward position.

Initially, the new regime adopted natalist policies. Couples with seven or more children received a plot of land on which to build a home. The state limited access to birth control and banned abortions. Families who sent their sons to the war were compensated with food coupons, monetary rewards, and expanded educational opportunities. Overall, fertility rates increased from 6.3 in 1976 to 7.0 in 1986, as Iran's population expanded dramatically from 34 million to 49 million (Dungus 2000; Aghajanian 1995).

When the war ended in 1988, the government faced a population explosion and a disastrous economy. Supported in this by Ayatollah Khomeini, the state began to encourage family planning. Modern approaches to reproductive health were integrated into religious teachings and implemented as part of state health policy. Birth control was reauthorized in 1989. The state also requested assistance from the UN Fund for Population Activities. The architects of the new birth-control program were Hussein Malekafzali and his colleagues Habibollah Zanjani and Muhammad Alizadeh. Each had held positions in the Ministry of Health since the

Pahlavi era. Their goals were to encourage birth spacing of three to four years, discourage early and late pregnancy, and limit family size at first to three and later to two children (Aghajanian 1995). The team reintroduced some of the birth-control policies of the pre-revolutionary National Organization of Women that had been shelved, and added many new features. This time, they had more success than under the shah.⁷

By the end of the twentieth century, Iran had become a model for other developing nations in the area of population control. Before the revolution, the annual rate of population growth had dropped from 3.1 percent in 1966 to 2.7 percent in 1976. This trend had reversed itself after the revolution, so that by 1986, the annual rate of population growth was 3.9. In the next decade (1986–1996), the annual rate dropped once again, this time more dramatically, to 2.0 percent. Total fertility rates also dropped to 2.0, below replacement levels, making Iranian rates comparable to those of South Korea, Thailand, and Malaysia. Between 1986 and 1996 there was a 50 percent drop in the number of women who married before the age of twenty, even though the state encouraged early marriage. The average age of women at first marriage increased from 19.7 in 1976 to about 22 in 1996, with the gap between rural and urban women at first marriage decreasing (Nomani and Behdad 2006, Table 4.1; Zangeneh 2005; Howard 2002, 107–111; Aghajanian and Mehryar 2005). By 2004, these numbers had further improved so that 74 percent of women of childbearing age were using various methods of family planning (UNICEF 2007). While many engaged couples delayed marriage due to financial problems, the success in population control was attributed to several other factors:

- As studies of fertility in other developing countries have shown, a rise in female literacy rates leads to a decrease in fertility rates, even when no other substantial changes are introduced (Jain 1981). Iran experienced a dramatic rise in literacy rates between 1985 and 2005, especially among rural women, which was the key factor contributing to a decrease in fertility rates overall.
- All forms of contraceptives (birth-control pills, condoms and other prophylactics, the IUD) became free and/or widely available for married couples. A condom factory, the only one of its kind in the region, was established. Hospitals and trained physicians in mobile units performed

⁷ I interviewed Muhammad Alizadeh while I was in Tehran in April 2005, and he generously provided me with many details of their program. Ali Reza Marandi, a pediatrician and two-time Minister of Health (1985–1989 and 1993–1997), headed the project. He received the UN Population Award in 1999 and the World Health Organization Award in 2000 for the success of his organization in reducing the birth rate.

vasectomies and tubal ligations free of charge, and provided injectable contraceptives in both rural and urban areas.

- Thousands of midwives were educated about contraceptive technologies. The state also recruited female volunteers as intermediaries between the clinics and young couples. By 1999, there were more than 40,000 of these volunteers, mostly married women with children. Each volunteer monitored about fifty families.
- Family planning was integrated with primary healthcare. A rural health network was established with 17,000 clinics. Each clinic had three to four mobile units that provided family planning to 80 percent of the rural population. By 1997, rudimentary rural healthcare services were available to 85 percent of the population. Infant mortality rates dropped to 31 deaths per 1,000 live births, and mortality rates for children under five dropped to 36 deaths per 1,000 live births. Lower death rates for children resulted in lower pregnancy rates and smaller families. Healthcare centers vaccinated children, took care of the basic needs of the whole family, and also distributed contraceptives. As a result, there was no stigma attached to visiting a clinic for a (married) woman.
- The Sixth Parliament legalized abortion up to the fourth month of pregnancy if it threatened the life of the mother or the child. Abortion remained illegal in cases of rape or malformation of the fetus, despite attempts by the Sixth Parliament to legalize it in such instances. However, illegal abortions continued to take place in many hospitals and clinics, usually under a doctor's supervision.
- Infertility treatments became part of family planning, despite their prohibitive costs. This included artificial insemination (with the husband's semen). This policy generated much good will, since family planning was no longer equated solely with prevention of pregnancy.
- New family planning policies attempted to raise the awareness of both women and men regarding reproductive issues in general, rather than focusing solely on contraceptives. A massive nationwide campaign for family planning and modern sex education was begun. High-school students (both girls and boys) and factory workers received routine lectures and seminars on the subject. Engaged couples were required to attend family-planning classes before marriage, where they were taught about sex, including ways of obtaining and giving pleasure, and lectured on the benefits of smaller families. Iran became the only country in the region that required such classes before marriage. The same center conducted exams on venereal disease and drug abuse before marriage, and required those marrying close kin to undergo genetic tests to prevent hereditary diseases. Married couples were advised to delay pregnancy, and women were told to bear children between the ages of twenty and thirty-five.

- The state involved many clerics, including low-level ones, in the campaign for birth control. Since clerics have traditionally provided people with advice on sexual matters, their inclusion in the new policy was not as unusual as it may seem. Medieval Muslim literature had discussed birth control, and the government republished some of these texts in order to prove that birth control had long been acceptable under Islam. On television programs and in Friday prayers, clerics, including the Supreme Leader Khamenei, assured the public that contraceptives were religiously sanctioned.⁸
- The Basij organization, including the Basiji Sisters, was mobilized for health projects. From time to time, close to half a million Basijis were sent out on a national immunization campaign against polio and other infectious diseases. Vaccination rates for childhood diseases exceeded 95 percent, all of which was paid for by the state. On one occasion, according to the UN, more than eight million children under five were vaccinated in a single day (Howard 2002, 106).
- Journalists received incentives, such as free vacations, to give more coverage to family planning. By 1996, 93 percent of urban homes and 70 percent of rural ones had television sets, which advertised the social, economic, and health advantages of a smaller family. The media openly addressed the side effects of various contraceptive methods and suggested that husbands and wives should seek assistance from their clinic advisors in making their choice.
- The state instituted a broader social security and pension program for retirees, thereby reducing the need for large families as security for old age.
- Family planning was tied to the environmental and ecological concerns of Third World countries. Hence, birth control was presented as a form of political struggle for better living conditions in Iran and in the developing world (Fig. 11.5).⁹

Citizens complied with these policies to a remarkable degree, but in some cases, such as age of marriage, ignored the state's attempts to lower it. A subsequent study showed that the increase in a husband and wife's level of education had also contributed to the success of the program (Tehrani *et al.* 2001). While more girls than boys continued to die before their first birthday, there has been no evidence so far that substantial numbers of

⁸ Milani 1999, 1.

⁹ The above information is based on Hoodfar 1994; 1998; Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000; Roudi 1999; Dungus 2000; Howard 2002; Mirzazadeh 2004; Aghajanian and Mehryar 1999; Wright 2001; UNICEF 2007; recent issues of the journal *Behdasht-e Khanevadeh* (Family Health, Tehran); and interview with Muhammad Alizadeh, Tehran, April 2005.



Figure 11.5 Birth-control poster

baby girls were abandoned (as in China) or aborted (as in India) so that parents could have boys. Traditionally, Iranian society has valued sons over daughters. Moreover, since polygamy and repudiation were still male prerogatives, wives without sons would be expected to have been in a more precarious situation – but this has not proved to be the case, so far at least. Indeed, after a decade of revolution and war, families seemed to place greater value on having daughters than before.¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, in a study that explored the attitudes of teenage girls in the province of Semnan toward puberty and marriage, 97 percent of the girls expressed the desire to have

Friedl writes that in rural areas and small towns in and around the province of Kohgiluyeh/Boir Ahmad in southwest Iran, fathers and brothers realized the economic significance of education. They pushed college girls to enter more lucrative fields like engineering, medicine, or pharmacy and discouraged them from the humanities and the social sciences, even when the girls wanted to study such fields. In contrast, boys were sometimes discouraged from advanced education and sent into business where returns are often higher. Fathers and brothers also welcomed financial assistance to the parents by daughters. The number of unmarried women who financially supported their parents rapidly increased. This process improved relations between fathers and daughters and reduced the financial burden on brothers, who have traditionally been the major source of support for older parents. As a result, sisters felt they were entitled to a larger share of their father's estate and some in Boir Ahmad went to court to challenge their brothers over inheritance rights (Friedl 2009).

An international study similarly suggested that men's attitudes toward women had changed. In a comparative study of Iran, Jordan, and Egypt, Mansoor Moaddel and Taghi Azadarmaki found that 76 percent of Iranians agreed that two or less was the ideal number of children in a family, 40 percent felt that a woman's employment did not interfere with her intimacy with her children, and only 45 percent felt that a woman needed to have children to feel satisfied. All of these numbers were substantially lower than those in Egypt and Jordan (Moaddel and Azadarmaki 2002).

Iran's birth-control campaign showed that the state was willing to articulate a more liberal discourse on sexuality when it suited its purposes, in this case population control. Even so, child marriage, violence against women, repudiation, polygamy, lack of community property, and unequal inheritance rights persisted. On the latter issues, the regime followed a patriarchal and often misogynistic reading of Islam, and refused to adopt a more liberal and tolerant interpretation that would have empowered women in their personal lives.

Women's empowerment was hardly the goal of the Islamist state. Moreover, whenever birth control came in conflict with men's access to sexual pleasure, the state refused to support the former. For the purposes of population control and women's health, doctors in the Ministry of Health recommended that women not have children until after the age of twenty ("Miyangin" 2005, 76). But the state continued to keep the legal age of marriage low in order to serve men's sexual interests. Finally, during the reformist Sixth Parliament, the state agreed to raise the legal marriage

one or two children, and most wanted at least one girl (Malekafzali *et al.* 1998, 8). Many points in the above paragraphs were suggested by Shahla Ezazi, Saïd Madani-Ghahfarokhi, and Houchang Chehabi.

age from nine to thirteen. Nonetheless, there was still a ten-year discrepancy between the legal age of marriage and the higher mean age of marriage.

Likewise, temporary marriage and polygamy remained legal, though both practices contributed to prostitution and venereal disease. The state continued to follow a dichotomous policy, on the one hand intervening in the sexual conduct of citizens to encourage smaller families and to assure men's unrestricted access to sex, and on the other denying women greater control in other areas of their lives. This was the secret of the Islamist state's sexual economy.

Once in office, Ahmadinejad tried to reverse the fertility trend and revive the pronatalist trends concomitant with Ayatollah Khomeini's jihadist policies of the early 1980s, even though Khomeini had supported population control by the time of his death in 1989. Ahmadinejad

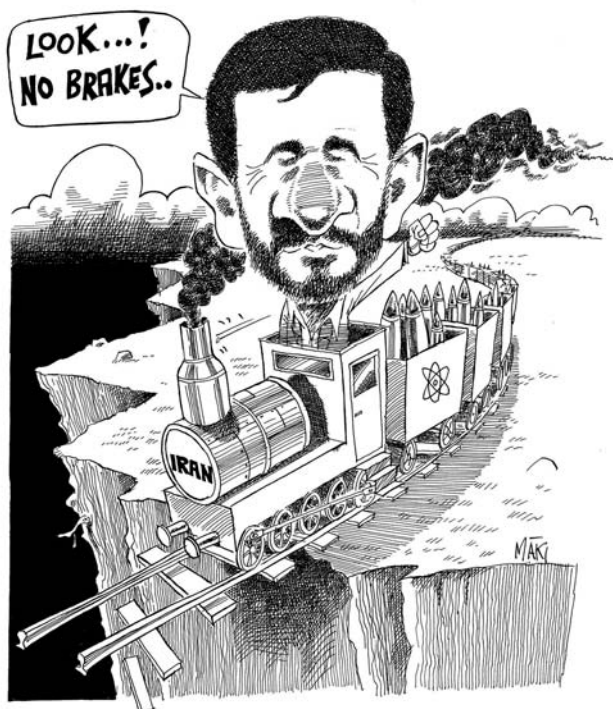


Figure 11.6 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the subject of numerous international cartoons after stating in February 2007 that Iran would not retreat on its nuclear program, which he compared to a train without brakes

declared that a stronger Iran, with a nuclear capability, needed to be more populous and recommended more part-time rather than full-time employment for women (Fig. 11.6). Even before he assumed power, the state attempted to restrict abortions. However, the president's comments alarmed the public and even many in the government, who saw them as yet another sign of his bellicose foreign and domestic policies ("Iran's President" 2006).

Sexual awakening: rural and town marriages and the dilemma of unmarried girls

Companionate, monogamous marriages, in which individuals have a strong voice in choosing a spouse, had become an accepted norm among the educated urban middle classes by the 1970s. But in poorer rural communities, parents continued to arrange their children's marriages, and girls were married at a very young age, often around puberty or before. With the nearly universal adoption of birth control, more health and sex education in the 1990s, and expanding access to a broader range of media, marriage practices evolved in rural communities as well. By 2000, people in poor rural communities of southwest Iran no longer viewed marriage as only an institution for procreation. Young people looked for psychological and social compatibility, mutual intimacy, and affection, better earning potential of their mate, and insisted on choosing their partner (Fig. 11.7). Some fathers granted their daughters more autonomy because they wanted them happy and because times had changed and it "would be futile to fight against the spirit of the times" (Friedl 2009). Relations between fathers and children had undergone a profound shift. In the province of Boir Ahmad the old autocratic fathers of yesterday who provided for the family but maintained their distance were now disparagingly called "shahs." The new father was expected to be a friend, *doust*. However, young people remained financially dependent on their fathers because of high unemployment. Meanwhile, state laws that granted fathers extensive power over children, especially daughters, made it complicated for fathers to remain *doust* (Friedl 2009).

Despite continued resistance by more conservative sectors of society, birth-control and sex-education classes became mandatory for prospective couples after 1993. Participants received contraceptives and advice on intimate sexual matters. Offered in about 5,000 health centers, these classes lasted over an hour, with separate sessions for men and women. Class content varied somewhat according to the cultural diversity of the nation, from the more liberal northern province of Gilan to the much



Figure 11.7 Courting

more conservative southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan. Generally, participants watched a film explaining the body's erogenous zones, and the sexual needs of men and women. The emphasis seemed to be on male sexual gratification and ways in which wives could keep their husbands satisfied and content (Mahdavi 2007b). Female sexuality was discussed. Many women were surprised by what they learned in this class. Shohreh, a twenty-year-old sociology student, who attended the classes before marrying her fiancé, declared:

I felt ashamed ... that I'm twenty years old but I still know nothing about sex. I ask myself why I've never read any books about it. Before I watched this film, I thought that an orgasm was something only men have. I didn't know that women could have such a feeling. (Cited in Zangeneh 2005)

Many couples returned for individual counseling after marriage. This meant that young couples no longer had to exclusively rely on in-laws to resolve marital conflicts and had access to other sources of authority.

Medical doctors had reported marital rape on the wedding night for over a century. In an effort to reduce sexual and psychological trauma for young women who might be virgins until their wedding, doctors now advised a couple to wait until both were mentally and physically prepared and reminded them of the importance and impact of the first sexual encounter, especially on women. As Dr. Aminian points out:

If, for example, a couple is suffering from stress, or is physically tired, or one of the partners really doesn't feel like having sex, then they shouldn't force it just because it is the wedding night ... We even tell the couples that it can take two or three weeks before the situation is right to have sex for the first time. (Cited in Zangeneh 2005)

The young couple is also advised to delay pregnancy until they have adjusted to their new life.

Other shifts in social and economic trends, including greater urbanization, contributed to these dramatic changes in gender relations and sexual mores. Hundreds of thousands of male and female university students shared same-sex apartments in cities. This furnished greater opportunities for dating, free of the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors. As parental authority substantially weakened in Tehran and other urban communities, a decline in arranged marriages and an increase in "marriages based on free choice" was observed (Kian-Thiébaud 2005, 52). Marriages within kinship groups also decreased. Slightly more than 20 percent of couples were first cousins, and around the same number were distant relatives. The lowest numbers of kin marriages were found in the culturally liberal northern province of Gilan, and the highest in the culturally conservative southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan, where the mean age of women at first marriage was sixteen (Bahramitash and Kazemipour 2006, 124).

Growing numbers of urban and rural women never married. They insisted that men had unfair expectations of women, even when the women were employed and contributing to the family income. Women were expected to do all the housework, to prepare elaborate meals and entertain guests, and to routinely visit in-laws and relatives (Friedl 2002). A "proper" wife still deferred to her husband's authority and respected the wishes of her in-laws. Many men promised to help with chores and child-care, to give their wives time to study and work outside the home, to be kind and understanding, but, as in so many other parts of the world, husbands often failed to fulfill these promises. Accounts of such occurrences influenced younger sisters and cousins, who sometimes chose not to marry at all (Kian-Thiébaud 2005).

Despite significant changes in the 1990s, great differences continued to exist between urban and rural communities, and between different regions. In increasingly urbanized northern villages, and those around Shiraz and Isfahan, educated girls, including doctors and dentists who earned substantial incomes, became desirable marriage partners. High-school teachers were even more sought after because their summers off gave them more free time in which to raise a family. Young women's expectations in marriage had also increased. Their ideal husband was a

man who was “good to talk to, pleasant to look at, reasonable and good-tempered, [had] a good income, and [helped] with housework” (Friedl 2003, 166). Marriage ceremonies and the requisite gifts had also become more extravagant. A woman’s family regarded an expensive wedding ceremony and a large *mahriyeh* as the best forms of insurance against repudiation (Friedl 2002, 113).

In villages surrounding Shiraz, young boys might decide whom they wanted to marry, and girls might refuse the husband their parents had chosen for them. Mary Hegland reports:

As a newly married couple moves to its own home, the older generation loses influence over their lives. Brides and daughters-in-law no longer have to work under the direction of their mothers-in-law and defer to their wishes. Brides run their own homes and kitchens, and do not want their mothers-in-law to tell them what to do. Twenty-five years ago, married couples barely spoke to each other in public ... Now married couples can be openly affectionate physically with each other in front of others ... Engaged couples go visiting together to the homes of relatives. They even go into Shiraz together. They visit in each other’s homes, and may even stay overnight. (Hegland 2005)

Thus, a gradual process of individuation was taking place in rural communities as well. At the same time, the increase in the age of marriage for women and the reduced popularity of arranged marriages and kinship marriages had led to the appearance of an unprecedented social category, “the unmarried female teenager who lives at home” (Friedl 2002, 113). In villages and small urban communities this phenomenon was so new that

no culturally and socially acceptable and meaningful way of living has yet developed for these young women. While their teenage brothers have the run of their village or town, the young women cannot go out unchaperoned without risking their reputation; they have no income and are therefore entirely dependent on the generosity of their father and brothers; they have very little to do at home because housework is shared among all female family members; their social circle is extremely limited; and outside work is not to be had. Most of them simply sit, bored, in front of the television. They “sit at home waiting for a good suitor,” people say. And as the days of early, arranged marriages are over in most families, this “waiting for a suitor” is more dependent on chance than ever before. (Friedl 2002, 113)

In more culturally conservative parts of the country, such as the southwestern province of Sistan-Baluchestan, the southern province of Khuzestan, the western province of Kurdistan, the northeastern provinces of Khorasan, or the central province of Yazd, where arranged marriages were still the norm, girls with college or even high-school diplomas were threatening to some men and their families. Here, young women found out that “their higher education, which they hoped would improve their

marriage prospects, now ‘overqualifies’ them with most Iranian men” (Shavarini 2006, 208). From an early sample of more than 500 women in Yazd who had married and given birth before the age of fifteen, Soraya Tremayne concludes that girls who left school after the primary level married more easily and gained status by virtue of their marriage and children. Those who enrolled in university and moved away from home might find partners at the university. The problem, Tremayne reports, resided with the large middle group of girls who stayed in their villages, continued into secondary school, but neither attended college nor found employment. These young women missed out on both jobs and husbands, and were subject to much stricter paternal control. Their recreation seemed limited to intrafamilial activities, such as going out for pizza, watching television, visiting the extended family, or occasionally going on pilgrimage with them (Tremayne 2006, 80).

These young women were not ignorant of sexual matters, however. Religious teachers at school and on local television stations lectured on Shi’i regulations of sexuality. *Bazaaris* and itinerant vendors sold condoms alongside candy and cigarettes. Satellite television, present in a significant number of urban and rural homes, provided Western representations of sexuality in popular programs ranging from *Baywatch* and *Sex in the City* to more sober and educational ones, such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, where sex and sexuality were common themes.

Ahmadinejad knew well that such households comprised his political base. Rather than expanding employment for women, Ahmadinejad’s central policy with regard to the family was facilitating marriage through various loans and subsidies, advocating pronatalist policies, encouraging polygamy, and promoting part-time employment. In 2007, Tehran’s mayor, Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, complained that he could not continue the marriage-loan program, which his predecessor Ahmadinejad had instituted as mayor, because it would bankrupt the city’s treasury. At the same time, Ahmadinejad viewed marriage loans as integral to his campaign strategy and battled with the Seventh Parliament to institute similar loans for the whole nation. In 2006 he requested the sum of 1.3 billion dollars to provide cash subsidies for housing for newlyweds from low-income families, and established the Imam Reza Love Fund (Sandoq-e Mehr-e Imam Reza) for this purpose. When the Parliament refused to approve the fund, Ahmadinejad created an alternative venue, including conservative NGOs, that were not responsible to the Parliament and could distribute the funds independently. This provoked a major conflict between the president and the Parliament that spilled into other areas. The marriage crisis, coupled with high unemployment rates and a series of other social problems, could not be resolved

with stopgap measures. Still, these measures were meant to enhance Ahmadinejad's populist credentials.¹¹

A radical discourse on gay/lesbian rights

The new discourse on sexuality has not been limited to heterosexual relations, dating practices, or traditional marriage issues. In addition, it has cautiously touched upon the nation's small gay subculture. The Iranian Queer Organization (formerly known as the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organization or PGLO) was founded in 2004. Its headquarters are in Toronto, Canada, but the group has many branches in Europe and the US, as well as an underground office in Iran (Fig. 11.8).

In December 2004, *MAHA: The First Iranian GLBT e-Magazine* began publication from an anonymous site inside the country, with the support of diaspora GLBT activists in England. Like other journals of its kind, *MAHA* interviewed international gay activists, published articles and letters about the experience of being closeted, addressed the trauma of hiding one's sexuality in both the family and the workplace, and



Figure 11.8 Logos of Iran's GLBT community

¹¹ For more details see "Ruzaneh" 2007; "Dowreh-ye Tazeh" 2006; "Manba' Afzayesh" 2006. Special thanks to Meir Javadanfar for additional information.

celebrated coming out and rejoicing in one's sexuality. Additionally, it contained advice columns responding to readers' concerns about sexual problems, including HIV/AIDS.

The journal included glossy, provocative photographs, though it avoided illustrations with frontal nudity. It had regular features on the history of homosexuality. Articles about Oscar Wilde, Sigmund Freud, and Alfred Kinsey, as well as essays on sexuality under Stalinism and Nazism, appeared alongside discussions of homosexuality in Iranian history, including brief biographies of prominent artists such as Sadeq Hedayat and Fereydoun Farrokhzad.¹²

Efforts to redefine homosexuality and encourage a more modern gay culture extended to the domain of language itself. Instead of the term *hamjens baz* (roughly translated as "faggot") the journal used the more respectable term *hamjens gara* "homosexual orientation". Many articles tried to explain the difference between the two terms. Jahangir Shirazi defined a *hamjens gara* as one who fights for his/her rights as a homosexual. A *hamjens gara* "does not try to trick or blackmail his partner" in order to exploit him sexually, as a *hamjens baz* does. Instead, a *hamjens gara* "wants a mutual and conscious relationship based on choice" (Shirazi 2005, 27). He also suggested caution in the appropriation of Western GLBT tactics in the linguistic domain. The queer movement in the West (re)claimed outrageously contemptuous terms with pride, but Shirazi argued that the Iranian struggle for homosexual rights, which was calling for basic recognition of human rights, could not do the same:

Today we had better avoid extremes and follow a gradual path of sexual enlightenment, depending on the appropriate time and place, and leave it to the next generation to define their feelings and emotions with whatever terms they wish. (Shirazi 2005, 28)

What made the journal such a groundbreaking publication was its discussion of homosexual relations within contemporary Iranian society and of the many ways in which closeted homosexuality also affected heterosexual marriages. *MAHA* was fearless in challenging the state's prohibition against homosexuality, writing, for example, that many religious texts recognized the right of a man to have sex with a little girl, but not the right to consensual homosexual relations among adults: "We belong to a society where pedophilia is legal and justified according to the *shari'a*, yet a free and voluntary sexual relationship,

¹² See for example "Gerayesh-e Jensi" 2005, 18; and "Mosahebeh ba Babak" 2005, 8–9.

between two homosexual adults, is considered a crime” (Jamshid 2005, 27).¹³

Like many advocates of women’s rights, *MAHA* was critical of the new religious thinkers for their silence concerning sexuality and gender. Religious reformers such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, who spoke of “Protestantization of Islam,” closed their eyes to the sexual concerns of the nation and ignored

thousands upon thousands (if not millions) of Muslim homosexuals, who attend mosques, including homosexual clerics. The truth is that these individuals form a significant social, cultural, and religious foundation out of which the [reformist] religious thinkers have emerged. The silence of the theoreticians of Islamic Protestantization about the social and cultural rights of homosexuals, especially Muslim homosexuals, is the missing link in the discourse of our religious thinkers. (“Halqeh-ye Gomshodeh” 2004, 11–12)

MAHA proposed a more tolerant reading of the Qur’an. Pressing a believer into choosing between his “religious and conscientious beliefs” and his “sexual and inner inclinations,” was akin to condemning him/her to a life of hell. It was not man but God who rendered this type of judgment in the afterlife (“Halqeh-ye Gomshodeh” 2004, 11–12). If Islam was a religion of equality, then believers should not be divided on the basis of their sexual orientation, “where homosexual believers become ‘second class citizens’ and non-homosexual ones are deemed closer to God. No one can claim to own God and the Qur’an, and no one can be forced out of a religion” (“Hamjensgarayan-e Mosalman” 2005, 16).

Critically appropriating the Aristotelian–Islamic definition of rational happiness, which calls for moderation as a prerequisite to contentment, *MAHA* argued for a “rational moderation” between one’s religious beliefs and sexual desires, without clerical mediation between God and human beings. Every person should be the judge of his/her ethical conduct. Since homosexuals of “the two other Abrahamic religions [Judaism and Christianity] have reached a consensus between their religious beliefs and their sexual inclinations,” Muslims should be able to do the same and continue “the path laid out by Jewish and Christian religious thinkers” (“Hamjensgarayan-e Mosalman” 2005, 17–18). This new reading of the Qur’an, *MAHA* advised, ought to begin with a reinterpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. “The story of the people of Lot suggests that homosexuality has been part of human society from its beginning and, contrary to what orthodox clerics claim, is not an imported Western product.” Also, in the Qur’anic or biblical accounts “there is no single

¹³ This article first appeared in www.taktaz.com.

reference to female homosexuality. So why is female homosexuality (*mosa-heqeh*) not free and recognized in Muslim societies?" ("Hamjensgarayan-e Mosalman" 2005, 16).

MAHA criticized secular Iranian intellectuals and artists who dared not speak out in defense of homosexuality: "If an artist or anyone else is sent to jail for the 'crime' of homosexuality, would Iranian artists and leftists speak out in his/her defense? We can definitely say no! This is the legacy of Islam and Stalinism! Though we must admit that in Europe, too, homosexuality is still viewed as only a tolerable 'perversion'" (Jamshid 2005, 27).

MAHA was critical of the persistent culture of status-defined homosexuality that maintained rigid active (*fa'el*) and passive (*maf'ul*) identities, and regarded only the latter as *hamjens baz*. The journal suggested that the gay and lesbian communities of Iran adopt a more flexible gender identity. The majority of the articles in *MAHA* were aimed at constructing a modern and humanistic gay culture in Iranian society, one that broke free from the remnants of status-defined homosexuality, with its roots in Greco-Roman and Middle Eastern traditions. *MAHA* insisted that homosexual relationships, like heterosexual ones, were based on emotional and sexual needs. They reflected our desire for "exchanging love and affection, for kindness and warmth, for friendship and unity, for the sharing of one's feelings and emotions, in a word, the need for becoming more complete, or the very same thing that takes place in a physical-sexual heterosexual relationship" ("Hamjensgarayan-e Mosalman" 2005, 16).

Through columns and letters, we learn that many "active" partners remained in denial of their sexual identity and treated their "passive" partners with contempt. In an analysis that continued the work of feminist thinkers in the West, *MAHA* linked this disdain for the "passive" partner to scorn for women:

There are homosexuals in our nation who, in their own words, are only *doers*. These people not only do not identify as homosexuals, but they also spend more time than others berating homosexuality and joking about it. People who think this way only show their backwardness and traditionalism. Because in our society, and quite unjustly, men have been given more rights, and women have been valued less, many homosexuals regard the "passive" [homosexual] as a woman, and hence have disdain for him. If we start adopting a more humane vision, we will not have such problems. ("Harfha-ye Shoma" 2005, 5)

The butch gays, those who identified themselves solely as "active," refused to recognize the problems of Iran's homosexuals as "their own problem," since they did not view themselves as homosexuals. But there was a second problem as well. The fem gays, those who identified themselves as "passive," put on feminine clothing and makeup, and even tried

to have sex-change operations, when in reality they were not transvestites. Iranian culture assumed that “if a man is interested in another man, then he is not a man, but a woman” (“Gay Budan” 2005, 16).

Clerics (including Ayatollah Khomeini) approved of sex-change operations, reasoning that surgery would end gender ambiguity (Harrison 2005). Muhammad Mehdi Kariminia, a university professor and cleric in Qom who wrote his doctoral thesis on Iranian transsexuals, illustrates the mindset of those who encourage such operations. He believes that “transsexuals are sick because they are not happy with their sexuality and so should be cured” through operations, while “homosexuality is considered a deviant act” and punishable by law (Fathi 2007, 5). These operations are often unsuccessful in resolving a person’s sexual ambiguity and might lead to depression and suicide (Ireland 2007). However, the state’s recognition of transsexuality as a medical condition that can be “cured” has created new spaces for living a transgendered life. Gays and lesbians who pass as transsexuals receive a medical certificate that protects them from legal persecution. Many go through such ruses, claiming that they are waiting for an operation at some unspecified future time (Fig. 11.9).

The rigid gender division between “active” and “passive” partners is not limited to gay men, but has also defined many lesbian relations in Iran. Delaram, a lesbian columnist of *MAHA*, complained:

Unfortunately in our country, and among lesbians, a situation has developed where they avoid calling themselves passive (*maf’ul*) or even versatile. This is a term of ill repute for them. They even argue among themselves about who is more active (*fa’el*). Each tries to speak with a lower voice, or act as a *luti* [physically strong, even gangsterish male homosexual] and adopt such mannerisms ... Many refuse to perform so-called feminine chores. For example, they never want to cook ... It is as if they view themselves as distinct from women. So should they be called transsexuals when scientifically they have none of the symptoms that would qualify them for a sex-change operation? ... How could you be a homosexual and not be a feminist? How could you want a woman as your partner, but not demand equal rights for yourself and for your partner? (Delaram 2005a, 14–15)

Compulsory heterosexuality remains a significant problem in contemporary Iranian society, since family members continue to view homosexuality as a transitional stage to adult heterosexuality and therefore pressure homosexual relatives to marry a member of the opposite sex (“Hamjensgarayan va Mo’zal” 2005, 7). In addition, the state, the media, and the society as a whole place a great deal of pressure on unmarried people to wed. Delaram noted:

In our country, many homosexuals are forced to marry a member of the opposite sex and must suppress their feelings as a result of family pressure ... Most continue



Figure 11.9 Sex-change operations in Iran: cover of *Zanan*, 2005

to have same-sex relations in secret, and of course more men succeed in doing so than women. (Delaram 2005b, 26)

Parents often blame the mandatory sex-segregated policies of the state for their children's homosexuality, and pressure them to seek medical advice. Doctors adopt various approaches with homosexual clients. They sometimes prescribe antidepressants and spend most of the therapy sessions (often paid for by the parents) discussing other issues in the lives of their clients. More enlightened doctors tell their clients that nothing can be done to "cure" their homosexuality. A significant number of homosexuals end up marrying a member of the opposite sex, hoping to shed their sexual inclinations, or just to have a family. A modern solution (which

replicates some premodern patterns of sexuality) is an arranged marriage between a lesbian and a gay man. The couple would have a “perfunctory marriage and look like a husband and wife,” but in reality each would pursue his/her own lifestyle (“Hamjensgarayan va Mo‘zal” 2005, 7).

A much older practice is to arrange the marriage of one’s same-sex beloved with a sibling or cousin. For example, a young man might arrange the marriage of his sister to his male lover. He would then marry another woman himself. In this way, the two male lovers (who are now both married) become brothers-in-law and would be able to continue the relationship under the guise of family connections (“Seh Nameh” 2005, 25–26). But *MAHA* rejected the idea of marrying an unsuspecting partner and suggested that such marriages exploited other people (Delaram 2005b, 26):

Do we really solve our pains and problems as gays and lesbians by getting married? Have we not sacrificed another human being, along with ourselves, in this marriage? Doesn’t the person we marry have hopes, wishes, and dreams as we do? Does s/he not need an honest (and not forced) love and affection? Have we been honest with the person we are marrying for a lifetime? Why should we selfishly sentence such a person and ourselves to a life of misery without love and honesty? (“Hamjensgarayan va Mo‘zal” 2005, 7)

The desire to have children was important, but did not justify marrying an unsuspecting heterosexual partner:

Yes, some homosexuals want to have children. However, we cannot ethically or responsibly use marriage with a non-homosexual to reach our goal. More than anything else, marriage should be based on love, attraction, and affection, the desire for the union of two people, not the desire to have children. (“Hamjensgarayan va Mo‘zal” 2005, 11)

MAHA claimed that among various NGOs and dissident political groups of Iran, there was greater tolerance for modern gay rights. In the 2005 presidential elections, several (unsuccessful) candidates, such as Mostafa Moin, included the slogan “respect for different lifestyles,” a euphemism for gay and lesbian rights, in their political platforms.¹⁴ But *MAHA*, which was distributed electronically in portable document format (.pdf) and managed to elude the Islamic Republic’s censorship laws for two years, was forced to discontinue publication in 2006 under fear of arrest and execution of its contributors. Through its courageous reporting, *MAHA* showed that the demands of the Iranian gay/lesbian community are very similar to those of women in heterosexual communities; these include more companionate unions and the right to live in dignity and

¹⁴ Private correspondence with editors of *MAHA*, December 2, 2005.

respect outside the matrimonial unit. Other publications such as *Cheraq* and the Iranian Queer Organization (formerly PGLO), led by Arsham Parsi in Canada, continue this work from the diaspora with covert input from the queer community inside Iran (Salami 2007).

State persecution of sexual transgression

Discussions surrounding marriage, fidelity, and sexual orientation continued, even in a persistent atmosphere of fear and intimidation, when the regime's persecution of openly gay men and transgressive heterosexual women increased after 2005. Mindful of its international image and reputation, the state sometimes replaced the stoning of women with public executions. In August 2004, 'Atefeh Rajabi, a feisty sixteen-year-old, was hanged from a crane in the main public square of the town of Neka for no greater crime than having had sex with a man to whom she was not married. By contrast, her male partner's crime did not merit the death penalty in the eyes of the law. This discrepancy is based on the notion that a woman's sexual transgression is a much bigger offense than a man's. Neka was also the city where several members of the government and security forces were arrested a few months later for setting up brothels and organizing child prostitution rings ("Child Prostitution Ring" 2005).

The war against homosexuality and an openly gay lifestyle escalated almost immediately after Ahmadinejad was elected to the presidency. In July 2005, the world was horrified by the torture and execution of two teenage boys in Mashhad: Ayaz Marhoni, eighteen, and Mahmoud Asgari, who was either sixteen or seventeen according to press reports. The authorities initially accused them of sodomy (*lavat*) but later charged them with rape of a younger boy. However, three independent gay sources inside Iran confirmed that "the teens were well-known in the city's underground gay community as lovers who lived together, and the rape charge was fabricated" (Ireland 2005). This was followed by the torture and execution of several other men charged with pedophilia and various sexual transgressions, whose sole "crime" was consensual sex.¹⁵

Under Ahmadinejad, the state gave additional responsibilities to the Basijis, who began to function as sexual *agents provocateurs*. Undercover Basiji agents entrapped gay men through ads in Internet chat rooms. Once the unsuspecting young men arrived at the designated meeting place, they were apprehended by the Basijis and tortured. Meanwhile, in the same culturally conservative provinces where girls lived under harsh patriarchal

¹⁵ Details can be read on veteran journalist Doug Ireland's web-log at <http://direland.typepad.com/direland/>.

fathers, male homosexuals risked death at the hands of the security forces, or even members of their own families, who justified the murder of a “deviant” relative as a matter of honor.

While the *shari‘a* requires either the actual confession of the accused or four witnesses who observed a homosexual act *in flagrante delicto*, today’s authorities sometimes look only for medical evidence of penetration in homosexual relationships. Upon finding such evidence, they punish the men. Because execution of men on charges of homosexuality has prompted international outrage, the state has tended to compound these charges with others, such as rape and pedophilia. Continual use of these tactics has traumatized Iran’s gay community and attenuated public sympathy for them. Meanwhile, many Iranians believe that pedophilia is rampant in the religious cities of Qom and Mashhad, including in the seminaries, where temporary marriage and prostitution are also pervasive practices.