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SIGNATURES, RIGHTS, NETWORKS: IRANIAN FEMINISM IN THE
TRANSNATIONAL SPHERE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation explores how Iranian feminists are mobilizing new discourses and creating dynamic transnational networks, enabled in part by cyber and print cultures. I investigate the ways in which Iranian feminist praxis consequently disrupts and reframes the putative opposition between secularism and Islam, and the multiple binaries assembled through this opposition—democratic versus authoritarian; liberatory versus oppressive; egalitarian versus patriarchal; and modern versus backwards. Within a multi-methodological and interdisciplinary framework, I examine three sites of Iranian feminist activism. I consider the One Million Signatures Campaign, a grassroots feminist movement that emerged in Iran in 2006, which utilizes Islamic human rights discourses and grassroots, democratic practices to engage the state in reforming family law. I also investigate the transnational network structure of the campaign, reflecting on the particular praxis offered by campaigners in the Iranian diaspora. Finally, I examine the writings and reception of Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. As a Muslim, feminist

and human rights activist, Ebadi emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with human rights, thereby disrupting discourses that counterpoise them.

Considered together, these three sites of Iranian feminism destabilize Western hegemony over Iran, consolidated through discourses which pit “superior” liberal democracies over “backward” Islamic nations. This oppositional staging gains purchase through geopolitical relations of power, including some iterations of global feminism, which deploy neocolonial saving and rescue narratives in the name of women’s human rights. Concomitantly, transnational feminist theory, which has destabilized the normative authority of Western hegemony and global feminism, can also often reify the very power relations it seeks to critique. By emphasizing the dangers, limits, and dilemmas of transnational feminist work, transnational feminist theory can neglect critical feminist projects on the ground, effectively writing some women out of history. My dissertation considers how Iranian feminists in Iran and the diaspora challenge these various modes of epistemic silencing. Through a close examination of the praxis of Iranian feminists, reflected primarily through the narratives of the activists themselves, my dissertation contributes to feminist theories of agency and helps revitalize transnational feminist studies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	viii
Introduction: Signatures, Rights, Networks: Iranian Feminism in the Transnational Sphere	1
Chapter 1	
From Exegesis to Cyberspace: New Strategies in a Global Age	33
Chapter 2	
Discourses of Equality, Rights and Islam in the One Million Signatures Campaign	74
Chapter 3	
From Tehran to Los Angeles and Back Again: The Transnational Politics of the One Million Signatures Campaign	105
Chapter 4	
“Those of Us Who Stayed:” The Transnational Activism of Shirin Ebadi	159
Conclusion: Towards a Politics of Hope: Renewing Transnational Feminist Praxis	192
Appendix A	207
Appendix B	214
Bibliography	221
Curriculum Vitae	236

INTRODUCTION

Signatures, Rights, Networks: Iranian Feminism in the Transnational Sphere

Contemporary Islamization projects, from Iran to Malaysia, have produced a startling paradox for women in Muslim contexts. On the one hand, women have witnessed restrictions of their legal rights. On the other hand, these projects—dependent on women’s participation—have mobilized a discourse of women’s equality under Islam, thus enabling women to challenge the contradictions between rhetoric and reality. This is certainly true in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the site of arguably one of the most dynamic women’s movements in the region, if not the world.

Superb scholarly work has been done on the range of women’s movements in Iran, from the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 (Afary 1996) to the state feminism of the mid-twentieth century (Paidar 1995) to the new movement of Islamic feminism (Mir-Hosseini 1999; Moghadam 2002) that emerged in the post-revolutionary period. Under-explored, however, is feminist mobilization in the contemporary period, marked by the formal end of the reform period under President Khatami (1997-2005), and the consolidation of the more conservative faction of the Iranian state from 2004 on.¹ What has feminist activism looked like since the end of the Khatami era? How have feminists

¹ The reform period is most commonly characterized as beginning in 1997 with the election of moderate cleric Mohammed Khatami to the office of president. Some argue that reformers, feminists included, began their efforts well before Khatami’s election (for example, see Moghadam 2002). While Saghafi (2004) argues that the reform period ended with the parliamentary elections of February 2004 when over 2000 reform candidates were illegally barred from running for office, I assert that the success or failure of the reform movement hinges on much more than electoralism. The proliferation of feminist activism in Iran, for example, can be read as a type of reformism that precedes the 1997 elections and continues beyond the 2004 election debacle. That said, Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 and his fraudulent reelection in 2009, combined with the intensification of U.S. policies towards Iran of isolation, sanctions, and containment, have created conditions in which there is less room for activists to publicly organize.

responded to the conservative shifts in the state? Are there continuities with the formal reform period? What discourses and practices are Iranian feminists using in this new moment? How do new media technologies facilitate their praxis? How are Iranian feminists engaging with transnational feminist frameworks? What role do diasporic Iranian feminists play? How do ideas about Iranian feminism circulate transnationally? How does the work of Iranian feminists shape transnational feminist praxis?

This dissertation attempts to answer these questions through an examination of three sites of Iranian feminism: the website of the Iran-based One Million Signatures Campaign, the California network of the One Million Signatures campaign, and the writings and transnational reception of Iranian Muslim feminist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. I consider what kinds of discourses these Iranian feminists are using to achieve gender equality and social justice, analyze the ways in which they draw on transnational networks, including within the cyber and print sphere, to achieve their aims, and place their praxis in relation to transnational feminist politics.

The One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws Campaign² emerged in 2006 after a peaceful protest in Tehran for women's rights was violently shut down. The campaign aims to end discriminatory family laws against women in Iran through signatures collected door-to-door, at public events, and on the internet. Composed of Muslim and secular women and men, the campaign is organized horizontally into a loose network of activists in different cities in Iran. Activists value the democratic, leaderless structure and bring that method to their discourses. An ethos of cooperation, rather than confrontation, informs their approach to potential signatories as well as to the state.

² Hereafter referred to as the One Million Signatures Campaign or the campaign.

The campaign originated in Iran, but is supported by Iranian feminists in the diaspora, who work closely with those in Iran. In Southern California, a cluster of activists help translate website articles, gather signatures and hold public events to educate Iranians and non-Iranians about the campaign. The transnational network of this campaign points to the emergence of feminist movements enabled by new cyber communities that interrupt geographic and conceptual boundaries, provide new frameworks for thinking about global feminism that refuse a secular/religious divide, and facilitate new transnational feminist practices that disrupt power-laden and hierarchical forms of global feminism.

The dissertation also looks at the writings and transnational reception of Shirin Ebadi, and her emergence as a transnational icon for Iranian and Muslim feminism. Reflecting on how her feminist discourses have circulated both within Iran and beyond, I show that they provide an alternative understanding of “Muslim” and “feminist” by working against problematic tropes that frame Islam and Iran as anti-feminist. Combining these reflections on Ebadi’s importance with an analysis of the campaign’s website, maintained by activists in Iran, and interviews with activists in its Southern California network, my dissertation demonstrates that within a Muslim context Iranian feminists articulate notions of gender equality, social justice, and women’s rights in ways that utilize, challenge, or modify secular-liberal notions of “rights” per se. Moreover, it illustrates how Iranian feminists produce new discourses of rights that challenge a secular/religious binary. Thus, it provides significant insight into how the new organizing modes emerging from cyber culture enable transnational political networks to develop, thereby effecting how local political cultures coalesce—and vice versa.

My dissertation contributes to feminist scholarship by challenging two problematic discourses: one which represents Iranian and Muslim women as passive victims of inherently oppressive religious cultures; and the other which frames gender justice as legible only through a secular-liberal paradigm. These discourses frequently collide—in academic, popular, and everyday contexts—when discussions and debates occur about feminism, democracy, gender equality, and global justice. My project critically intervenes to show how notions of gender equality and justice can be understood outside of a purely secular-liberal framework. My research engages feminist theories of agency to highlight the ways in which feminism in Iran simultaneously contests Orientalist, strict secular feminist, as well as patriarchal representations and interpretations of Iranian and Muslim women. Most feminist notions of agency continually reinscribe the precepts of secular-liberalism, eliding the actual capacities and practices of Muslim women. Some scholars have responded to such theoretical lacunae by arguing that agency must be considered within the particular historical, national, cultural, and religious contexts defined by the subjects of one’s analysis (Asad 1993; Asad 2003; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2001; Mahmood 2005). I draw on the work of these theorists to explore what “agency” means to Islamic feminists. Mahmood’s work (2001), for instance, argues that we must read the practices of religious women within the appropriate “grammar of concepts” that give meaning to those acts. While I believe that historical contexts do inform the grammar of such concepts, I trouble the rigid distinction between secular and religious grammars. In other words, my project considers whether the ideas about justice, equality and freedom emerging from activists in Muslim contexts disturb the secular frameworks within which feminist theorists are used to thinking about

these principles. My research foregrounds the discourses that emerge from Muslim and secular Iranian feminists, and then situates them in relation to the transnational “humanitarian” discourses (including feminism) that inform them. By asking how Iranian feminists interpret and reinterpret the concepts of Western political philosophy from their locations as Muslims and non-Muslims and as feminists, my project underscores the profound interplay between Islamic and secular concepts of rights, liberation, and justice.

A fundamental argument I make is that, insofar as Iranian feminism engages the transnational sphere, it not only draws from dominant transnational discourses, like those of women’s rights, but also intervenes in and redefines these dominant discourses. I critically contest the uni-directional application of transnational feminist theory to non-Western sites. Unfortunately, despite concerted effort to the contrary, transnational feminist studies often reproduce the very “West to the rest,” or local-South/global-North frameworks they seek to critique. In order to resist this tendency, my work asks the following questions: How do historical, political, and cultural contexts shape both the meaning and deployment of women’s rights? How are Iranian feminist discourses being used by activists in their everyday praxis? How do Iranian feminist discourses about women’s rights and agency circulate transnationally? How do these discourses intersect with and shape current discussions about religion, secularism, agency, feminism, democracy, citizenship, and rights? What activist strategies and methods are Iranian feminists using and how do they inform transnational feminist practices?

Considered together, my three sites of research allow me to map Iranian feminism and its circulation within the transnational sphere. By appreciating the connections—within relations of mutual exchange, debate, and contestation—between religious and

secular feminisms, my research investigates the terms and meanings of feminism, religion, secularism, and Islam, and ponders what these terms and practices reveal about relations of power and agency. My dissertation draws on theorists from a range of disciplines, including women's studies, Middle Eastern studies, and religious studies, and combines discourse analysis, qualitative interviews, and close readings in order both to explore the everyday languages and practices of Iranian feminists and to map their transnational domains. Through a close examination of the praxis of Iranian feminists, reflected primarily through the narratives of the activists themselves, my dissertation expands feminist theories of agency and helps revitalize transnational feminist studies. In addition to its timely focus on a newly emerging, and little explored, transnational social movement, my research also demonstrates how interdisciplinary feminist methodology and theory enable us to engage contemporary political actors and events with more insight and understanding.

Passionate Attachment:³ Epistemological and Methodological Approaches

My epistemological approach favors the ways in which the research subjects, themselves, narrate their ideas, experiences and actions. If the one of the central goals of feminist ethnography is “to understand the experience of women from their own point of view” (Reinharz 1992, 51), then that was the methodology that most appealed to me as I started this project. In the course of my research, however, I came up against certain constraints that would ultimately shape the direction and methodology of my dissertation.

³ Haraway (1988, 585) uses “passionate detachment” to evoke a strategy to challenge masculinist objectivism and produce feminist objectivity from the very situated and partial perspectives of women's lives. I lean on Haraway's approach, but rename it to make explicit the (conscious and unconscious) affective attachments (between people, ideas, politics and knowledge) created through feminist research and knowledge production.

As the daughter of an Iranian father, I am considered an Iranian national.⁴ Born in the U.S., however, I had to go through a rather extensive and bureaucratic process of paperwork and travel to Washington, D.C. to request and acquire my citizenship. After a two-year process, I was finally able to secure my Iranian birth certificate and passport.

I consider this dual citizenship an incredible privilege, particularly since most Americans cannot secure visas to travel to Iran and many Iranians cannot secure visas to the U.S. I had hoped to use this privilege to do extensive fieldwork in Iran with members of the One Million Signatures Campaign. But geopolitics had the upper hand. The political situation that emerged in Iran in 2004, when reform forces were barred from Parliamentary elections, became one in which the more conservative forces of the state began to consolidate their control. With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, the reform movement suffered another blow. Surveillance and repression of activists, including feminist activists, became more frequent, and any political activity that challenged the state was labeled as a "national security threat." Feminist activists saw their rallies and protests shut down in 2005 and 2006. Then, in 2008, an Iranian-American feminist activist, living and attending graduate school in the U.S., was arrested and detained in Iran while working on her Master's project. The internal repression was clearly escalating as a response to the Bush administration's deepening rhetorical war on Iran and its policies of isolation, sanction and containment. By the time I had secured my Iranian citizenship and passport, senior Iranian scholars advised me that moving forward with fieldwork at this juncture posed too many risks, both for me and for the activists with whom I had planned to work.

⁴ Under the current law, Iranian citizenship is only granted through patrilineage or, for non-Iranian women, through conversion to Islam and a Muslim marriage to an Iranian man.

While fieldwork with activists in Iran was not an option, I did go to Iran in December 2008/January 2009 to visit my large extended family in Isfahan, Kerman, Shiraz and Tehran, and to get a sense of the political climate. I offer a “postcard” from that time, a brief snapshot of political observations: It is six months before the 2009 presidential elections in Iran and just a few months after Obama’s historic election to the presidency of the United States. Despite the incredibly high inflation, massive unemployment, and choking pollution in the major cities, people are in decent spirits. Jokes about George W. Bush are flying from Iranians’ cell phones and emails, and hope springs eternal for a change in United States-Iran relations. The reform candidates’ campaigns are heating up, and people are eagerly anticipating the June elections. Everyone says to me, “You must come back for the elections. It will be an historic time.” Iranians of all ages, genders and classes are tired of Mahmoud Ahmadienejad. He has certainly not put Iran’s oil revenues on people’s tables, as he promised. Everyone is excited about Obama. Like so many people around the world, many Iranians watched Obama sweep into victory on television. They celebrated his win as a sign of hope for their own futures. Obama is translated into Farsi as *Oo ba ma*. He is with us.

Let me offer a second “postcard” from Iran, this one almost exactly three years from the date of my visit to Iran, narrated to me by my cousins who have just come to the United States from Isfahan to get their daughter settled into graduate school. Over breakfast, they tell me that before they left, the supermarkets were empty of food, as people, panicked about the economic sanctions, snatched up all the food they could carry home. They tell me that on their flight from Tehran to Europe, Iran Air had to land in Ankara, Turkey to refuel, as sanctions are prohibiting the airline from buying fuel from

European airports. They tell me people are scared—scared of sanctions, of the threat of war. As Iraq has shown, it is always, always ordinary people, not regimes or individual leaders, who suffer from sanctions. So called “targeted” sanctions target everyone. They are war by other means.

I will return to these brief snapshots in my conclusion, as I elaborate a transnational feminist politics of solidarity that I claim offers the only viable hope for challenging U.S. policies towards Iran, and supporting activists in Iran who are pushing for change from within. Indeed, U.S. and Iranian politics are deeply intertwined, as they have been for decades. As isolation, sanctions and war talk escalate once again, as they did under George W. Bush, the space for scholar-activist work inside Iran once again shrinks.

Against the backdrop of the long Bush years and the Iranian state’s crackdown on internal dissent, working and talking with activists inside Iran became untenable. I would never have put activists inside Iran at any greater risk than they already face. While this project fundamentally critiques the notion of Iran as an inherently repressive space, it also acknowledges the experience of activists inside Iran who’ve suffered greatly from internal repression meted out by parts of the Iranian state. Such repression from the state has been intensely exacerbated by the post-9/11 political climate, marked by massive Islamophobia and targeting of Iran through isolation, sanctions, containment and rhetorical war. Moreover, such a backdrop has produced a veritable lack of funding sources for U.S.-based doctoral students who wish to do fieldwork in Iran.

Given this context, the methodology of my project shifted necessarily, from ethnography to a multi-site investigation using discourse analysis, qualitative interviews

and close readings. Fieldwork inside Iran would have greatly enhanced this study, and I am keenly aware of the limits produced by the absence of perspective of those whose everyday lives and activist strategies take place within the specific parameters of the Islamic Republic. I could neither observe activists' door-to-door organizing inside Iran, nor speak with them about the ways in which they understand their praxis. While I don't believe ethnographic fieldwork produces more "authentic" accounts of women's lives than other methodological approaches, I believe it would have added an important dimension for understanding the relationship between local and global discourses and practices and enriched the narratives of Iranian feminists that I present here.

Confronting these limits, I turned to new sources of data that would ultimately allow me to do a multi-methodological and interdisciplinary project that would preserve the kernel of my original intentions and yield new possibilities and directions for my research. I turned to the Iranian diaspora for qualitative interviews. Analyzing that data alongside a discursive analysis of the One Million Signatures Campaign, and a close reading of a transnational figure like Shirin Ebadi allowed for an "excavation" of "hidden or unacknowledged" data (DeVault 1999, 55-56). Feminists have long sought to excavate the hidden or unacknowledged lives of women—for instance, their unremunerated, gendered and racialized laboring practices that socially reproduce husbands or other women for the workplace, and children (Glenn 1992; Hartmann 1979).

In analyzing talk and text, I have sought to excavate a partial view of the lives of Iranian feminist activists in different locations. In this approach, however, I do not mean to stabilize the category of "Iranian feminist activists" by presenting the subjects of my research as singular or unified, without class, ethnic, political and other kinds of

differences. Nor am I arguing for an essentialized gendered standpoint, extant *a priori*, that fails to render the historicity and specificity of gendered experiences (Bar On 1993; Longino 1993). Instead I wish, à la Haraway, to foreground the ways in which “[s]ubjugated’ standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (1988, 584).

Different iterations of feminist standpoint theory (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Hartstock 1981; Smith 1987) have sought to account for the ways knowledge is produced by and often through embodied beings, whose particular gendered locations and everyday laboring and social practices give them insight into the structures of power. Standpoint theorists argue that the everyday experiences of subjugated groups lead to particular kinds of knowledges that can illuminate the relationship between one’s social location and larger social structures.

However, standpoint theory has also been particularly vulnerable to the charge of essentializing women as an always already constituted subject. Bar On (1993) and Longino (1993) challenge standpoint theorists around the epistemic privileging of gender over other dimensions of women’s lives—race, class, sexuality—and fundamentally call into question the usefulness of epistemic privileging at all. Others, though, argue that the fundamental idea behind standpoint can accommodate women’s differences across racial, class and other lines. Collins argues for the integration of race and gender so that African American women’s experiences might offer a partial view, “one angle of vision” (1990, 234).

Women’s experience as an unquestioned form of data has also been highly contested. In her seminal essay, “The Evidence of ‘Experience,’” Joan Scott argues that

the elevation of “experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation” fails to account for the historical and ideological production of marginalized groups. Making women and other marginalized groups visible through their experiences without interrogating the conditions that produce experience, Scott argues, “take[s] as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize[s] their difference” (1992, 24-25). Using experience as an epistemological guidepost can, like standpoint theory, naturalize a universal gendered subject and obscure historical and political processes that constitute subjects.

While I do attempt to theorize from the discursive and lived realms of one group of Iranian feminist activists, and in this sense, lean heavily on the notion of “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988), I work against essentialism by drawing heavily from postcolonial feminist scholars whose work attends to historical processes of subject making, particularly the discursive ways in which the construction of the “Third World woman” secures Western—and Western feminist—hegemony (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ahmed 1992; Mohanty 1991; Spivak 1988). In conversation with such work, I acknowledge the fraught terrain of knowledge production about the Middle East and/or Muslims. Said (1979) excavated the epistemic violence behind the will to know the Middle East. As part of the colonialist project, the vast archive of Orientalist texts discursively produced the material “reality” of the Middle East as a unidimensional geographic region distinct from the West. A similar critique of the will to know was offered by Spivak (1988) when she asked, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak concluded that colonialism and knowledge production are so intertwined that subaltern women can

only ever speak through their interlocutors. Consequently, knowledge created by such interlocutors installs their own epistemic authority.

Spivak's cautionary voice guides my research and writing; at the same time, I'm deeply aware that it can guide a project such as mine only so far. At a moment when Orientalist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic discourses about Iran, and Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples rage like wildfire, *not* creating counter knowledges feels as or even more dangerous than participating in a contradictory, flawed, and power-infused enterprise. Feminist interventions into such discourses must be made, even as they risk contamination by old and new forms of dominant ideologies. As Grosz (1990) so eloquently reminds us, critique is not enough. The project of feminism must create alternatives to that which it critiques, and build essential counter-knowledges that might transform oppressive structures into something new.

To better navigate the challenges, dilemmas and contradictions of knowledge production, feminist scholars argue that self-reflexivity by the researcher surfaces the inherent power relations between her and her subjects, and makes clear the potential intertwining of knowledge production in political processes that might reify relations of inequality and domination (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997). Others argue that reflexivity can always only be partial, as "unconscious desire make[s] a fully intentional subjectivity impossible" (Clough 1998, xvii).

Still, some degree of reflexivity can help deconstruct the ways that researchers can be both insiders and outsiders. In her fieldwork, France Winddance Twine anticipated that Afro-Brazilians in Brazil would embrace her, an African-American, as part of a transnational community of African descended people. She found, however, that black

Brazilians had very different notions of race and racialization than she, and they resisted her attempts at familial solidarity. Ironically, it was with Caribbean immigrants in England, with whom she did not initially identify, that she found “the transnational black community that [she] had anticipated encountering in Brazil” (2000, 19). Her findings about insider/outsiderness were, in fact, counter-intuitive, revealing the degree to which subjectivities or identities are not innate or pre-formed, but emerge, shift and reshift within the production of knowledge.

Naheed Islam confronts these issues in her work on Bangladeshi immigrants in Los Angeles. As a “sociologist of upper-middle-class Bangladeshi Muslim origins” living in a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, non-heteronormative community in California, Islam states that the “multiplicity of [her] belongings raises the question, am I conducting research in my ‘own’ community when I do research in the Bangladeshi community in Los Angeles” (2000, 42)?

Naples, however, rethinks this dilemma, arguing that “the insider/outsider distinction masks power differentials and experiential differences between the researcher and the researched. The bipolar construction of insider/outsider also sets up a false separation that neglects the interactive processes through which ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ are constructed” (2003, 49). Indeed, as I experienced, political affiliations can create a sense of shared ideas and goals that minimize other kinds of differences between a researcher and her subjects. Furthermore, postcolonial feminists have destabilized the West/Other binary that consolidate colonial relations of power, and extend this critique to overly simplistic notions of where researchers and their subjects

are located (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Kaplan and Grewal 1994; Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991).

Questions of what constitutes insider and outsider status emerged for me throughout my project. I'm an Iranian-American born in the U.S. to an Iranian father and American mother. As my father, intent on mastering English and assimilating into U.S. culture, did not teach me Farsi, I'm neither a native nor fluent speaker. The working knowledge of Farsi I have acquired has perhaps allowed me more access to the Iranian community than a non-Iranian might have had, yet my limited Farsi vocabulary favored English as the primary language through which I communicated with and understood my research subjects. I worried that these limitations might reinforce my outsider status.

Following Naples (2003), on the other hand, if insider/outsider status is not given beforehand, but constructed through the research process, I certainly become more of an insider in the process of connecting to my subjects not only through our similar backgrounds, but also through our activist commitments. While I had not previously considered interviewing activists in the Iranian diaspora, once I did, the political and affective solidarity we built together guided and informed my thinking about the difficulty, and absolute necessity, of transnational feminist praxis. While I take full responsibility for the shortfalls and omissions of this study, I am deeply aware of how collective knowledge is, and how much these activists have shaped this project. While I had to contend with massive disappointment of not interviewing activists inside Iran, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to connect with feminists in the Iranian diaspora, with whom I now share a political "home." By home I don't mean a fixed geographical or even social location, but a sense of where my political and intellectual goals and

allegiances locate me. Nor do I mean to “pin” the body, in this case the Iranian feminist body, to a “grid,” locking it in a “cultural freeze-frame” (Massumi 2002, 2-3).

Using Naples’ understanding of positionality, which incorporates the “‘position’ from which one acts politically” as a “subject of investigation” and looks at the “political context in social actors’ political praxis” (2003, 22), I locate both myself and my subjects as social actors with political and epistemic commitments which are not fixed but are constantly moving and evolving. In this notion of positionality, I aim neither to essentialize feminists in the Iranian diaspora, nor to assume common histories based on heritage. Instead, I grapple with the particular political context within which we are all operating—as activists, scholars, knowledge producers, humans—and the various constraints and opportunities such a context produces as it shifts, moves and mutates.

As Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) argue, feminist methodology recognizes that politics is embedded in the epistemological projects we are engaged in. My dissertation utilizes and contributes to such a feminist methodology by foregrounding both the constraints and opportunities that emerged during my research, the political contexts that shape my subjects and me, the assumptions and investments guiding my project, and the political and intellectual frameworks that inhere in the claims I have come to make.

The overarching political context in which my project is located is, of course, the post-9/11 period, characterized in large part by the Global War on Terror⁵ and the virulent Islamophobia it has produced, as well as the decades-long tension between Iran

⁵ In his “9/11 Address to the Nation,” delivered on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush stated: “America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism” (2001). In an “Address to a Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks” delivered on September 20, 2001, Bush claimed: “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.” (2001). Soon after, the War on Terror, War on Terrorism and the Global War on Terror (GWOT) became interchangeable. While Obama is not using the term as much, the Global War on Terror still functions as the overriding military, ideological and discursive apparatus of the day.

and the United States. In this context, colonial/neocolonial and neoliberal relations of power govern the lives of not just my research subjects, but of my large, extended family in Iran, making the political quite personal indeed. Understanding Islam and the lives of Muslim women and men outside of the secular-liberal imaginary is not an abstract exercise for me, but an epistemic, political and deeply affective investment. In surfacing this investment, I do not lay claim to authenticity, or to uncontested authority to produce knowledge about Iranian and/or Muslim women; instead, I wish to foreground the ways in which I am deeply affected by, and live very much inside of, the conditions shaping my project.

My understandings of and relation to the secular and the religious have forever been reconfigured throughout the many years of researching, thinking, and writing this dissertation, as well as through the deepening ties I've built with friends and family from and in Iran. While I'm not a practicing Muslim, I can no longer call myself a secularist, understanding and seeing so vividly the relations of power that inhere within the regime of secularism. As scholars argue, the very lives and practices of ordinary Muslims are under profound threat, as their religiosity is scrutinized, held suspect, repudiated, and deemed in need of retooling by non-Muslims of many stripes (Mahmood 2006; Puar 2007). Others (Asad 1993; Asad 2003; Connolly 1999; Mahmood 2005) show us not only the power the secular has to define what is outside of it, and therefore subjugate it, but also how that power has acutely shrunk the potentiality and multiplicity that secularity might offer. As a regime of truth and as a mechanism of power, secularism in its fundamentalist form violently forecloses the very lives of Muslims around the world, who seek change from within their own contexts and on their own terms.

Mindful of the ways in which the political and affective intersect with epistemological and methodological concerns, I find the notion of partiality useful. As Haraway writes:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (Haraway 1988, 589)

Against masculine objectivism and disembodied authority, and against the universal in old and new forms, feminist knowledge produced by and through complex partiality can cut across all kinds of modes of power that stand in for knowledge and truth (Foucault 1979; Foucault 1980).

Interdisciplinarity and Method

As an interdisciplinary field, women's and gender studies has been a generative space for my research project. While little consensus exists within the field about the extent to which women's and gender studies has developed an interdisciplinary method versus incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach (Allen and Kitch 1998; Friedman 1998), less contested is the idea that interdisciplines such as women's and gender studies have created the space to shift "investigations beyond conventional limits on to innovative terrain" (Allen and Kitch 1998, 277). Furthermore, as Foucault (1979; 1980) shows, institutions are sites through which power disciplines bodies, produces norms, and proliferates knowledges and truth regimes. Certainly, the university, with disciplinary fields held over from the Enlightenment, is one such site.⁶

⁶ I thank Iona Man-Cheong for a generative conversation about interdisciplinarity.

Working outside of such disciplinary bounds can produce a sense of being untethered; yet, this room to roam between multiple methods productively allowed me to map connections between different discursive sites. Moving between these different sites, I could see how different political ideas and practices circulate, and how they might be received, reshaped, distorted, enlivened, silenced, interpreted, unheard, rethought, and animated.

I have relied heavily on the ethnographic methods of anthropology and qualitative sociology by privileging and mining the different textual and oral sources of Iranian feminist activists narrating their ideas and actions. I provide a detailed discourse analysis of the website of the One Million Signatures Campaign, examining three years of web articles in English, from 2006-2009, approximately 200 pages of text. The articles were all written by campaign activists in Iran and by Iranians in the larger transnational network. Tracing the content of the articles from the founding of the campaign to just before the 2009 presidential elections, I systematically identified their major themes, considering not only what activists say, but how they say what they say, and what is produced through what they say and how they say it.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 8 members of the Southern California network of the One Million Signatures Campaign, over half of the approximately 12-15 active campaigners in the area. Each interview was audio recorded, lasted from 90 minutes to 2 hours, and took place in campaigners' homes, in cafes, or in parks or other outdoor spaces. I listened to the interviews repeatedly, transcribed each interview, and systematically identified major and minor themes that emerged from my listening and transcriptions. I took detailed notes before, during and

after each interview, and made extensive notes as I was analyzing the interviews individually and together. I have shared my findings with my interviewees and received and incorporated feedback from them into my analysis. As with the web articles, I examine not only what the interviewees say and do, but also what is revealed about larger political and epistemic contexts in what it is they say. The integration of individual interviews with the archive of web articles allowed me to understand the connections between individuals and the larger networks and contexts in which they are situated, to place individual and collective discourses in relationship to their practices, and to map the transnational scope of a particular political praxis of select Iranian feminists.

Along with a discourse analysis and interviews, I do several close readings. I examine the writings of two key theorists of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Shari'ati and Ayatollah Khomeini, exploring their discourses to help provide historical background on debates about gender and Islam in Iran. I also look closely at the writings of Abdolkarim Soroush (2000), the most famous contemporary Iranian religious thinker, and put my own readings of Soroush in conversation with the work of Iranian anthropologist, Ziba Mir-Hosseini. I draw heavily on Mir-Hosseini's data (1999) on Soroush and on reform cleric Hojjat ol-Eslam Seyyed Mohsen Sa'idzadeh to give context to the rich culture of debate in Iran about gender, Islam and rights.

I also provide a close reading of Shirin Ebadi, a Muslim, feminist and human rights lawyer who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. I examine Ebadi's own and others' discourses surrounding her award, considering how Ebadi locates herself, and how others locate her in relation to other feminist discourses. I also investigate her 2007 memoir, placing it in the context of women's autobiographical practices. I draw on

feminist theories of transnational cultural reception to map the political and epistemological interpretations of Ebadi, and I argue for transnational reading and reception practices that broaden, rather than shrink, feminist possibilities.

Throughout the dissertation, I rely on scholars of Iran from many fields, including history, sociology, anthropology and religion for historical and contemporary analyses of Iran. I also draw heavily on the work of feminist scholars in the fields of Middle Eastern studies, Iranian studies, women's and gender studies, feminist theory, history, sociology, anthropology, literature and literary criticism. By moving between different data and methodologies—discourse analysis, qualitative interviews, close readings and scholarly literature on feminism and Iran—as well as among different and overlapping sites of investigation—Iran, the United States, and the transnational sphere—I offer an interdisciplinary, innovative and transnational feminist method that I hope will contribute to “the most expansive epistemologies and methodologies possible” (Allen and Kitch 1998, 292).

Organization of the Chapters

In Chapter 1, I focus on the post-revolutionary period in Iran, arguing that while women experienced many major legal setbacks, the Islamization of Iranian society produced a major paradox for the state. Increases in women's health and welfare, massive decreases in their fertility, and an explosion in levels of education and literacy—in general, overall improvements to their well-being—contributed to women's increased participation in social and political life in Iran. These realities chafed against the legal setbacks women faced after the revolution. Because women had been promised greater

gender equality under Islam, they exploited this contradiction in Iranian society by demanding greater legal equality.

I argue that we must understand the Iranian state as both an *enabling* and a constraining force in the lives of Iranian women. I look briefly at the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), when ideas about women's equality were deeply intertwined with the project of building a modern nation-state. Such a project brought improvements in women's lives, but mostly those who were urban, middle-class, and educated. Many women, primarily working-class, rural, and traditionally religious women benefited little from the state's programs. These exclusions explain the mass participation of women from many different sectors in the Iranian revolution of 1979.

I then examine the gender discourses of the two key theorists of the Iranian revolution, Ali Shari'ati and Ayatollah Khomeini. Each mobilized a broad discourse of women's rights and equality under Islam, framed as lost or compromised under the secular dictatorship of the Shah. Because the revolutionary state mobilized such a discourse around women's rights and equality, yet rolled back women's legal gains in the post-revolutionary period, women began to contest their inferior legal status using precisely the framework of equality under Islam. In other words, the imposition of Islam into all areas of women's lives became the very enabling condition that would allow them to challenge their legal exclusion.

I explore the context for this challenge—the movement of Muslim feminists and their secular allies that has come to be termed Islamic feminism. I consider the characteristics of this new movement and touch on the ways in which it has taken on a transnational scope. I draw heavily on the work of anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini

(1999), particularly her interviews with two key Islamic reformers, Abdolkarim Soroush and Hojjat ol-Islam Sa'idzadeh, during the height of the reform movement. As supporters and insiders of the revolutionary government, both Soroush and Sa'idzadeh ultimately became critical of the repressive and closed tactics of the state. As the movement of Islamic feminism developed, both Soroush's and Sa'idzadeh's philosophical and theoretical frameworks helped Islamic feminists ground their ideas about women's rights and equality under Islam. Islamic feminism, then, is a pragmatic discourse that engages the state using its own claims that Islam will deliver women's rights and equality. It produces new feminist subjects who claim spaces of authority during a period of relative openness.

Finally, I argue that the discourses of Islamic feminism moved from more elite spaces of the women's press to the discourses of everyday citizens through new cyber and print cultures. I use Eickelman and Anderson's (2003) notion of the "reintellectualization" of Islamic discourse to frame the ways in which the proliferation of Internet technologies helped legitimize Islamic feminism and opened up space for new interpreting publics. Such publics, like feminists, students, and other reformers, used Islamic feminist discourses to argue for women's rights and equality under Islam, and they did so, in part, through new mediums like the Internet. The One Million Signature Campaign, which I consider in depth in chapters 2 and 3, is an example of the rise of new publics through the reintellectualization of Islamic discourse.

The One Million Signatures Campaign emerged in 2006, during the rise of the conservative forces within the state and after numerous women's rights rallies were shut down. Chapter 2 considers the discourses and practices of the campaign. I bring a

discursive analysis to campaign articles posted on its website from 2006-2009. I argue that the campaign builds on the new political space created by Islamic feminism and deploys “Islamic Human Rights” discourses to claim the compatibility of Islam with human rights frameworks. The campaign uses the Internet to reintellectualize Islamic discourses, and to amplify the campaign out into the transnational sphere.

I also explore the ways in which the campaign highlights the relatively high status of women within Iranian culture, i.e., their comparatively high educational and literacy rates, and their political engagement, and argue that the campaign seeks to bring these cultural realities to bear on women’s legal status. By harmonizing culture with law, the campaign frames women’s legal rights as an inevitable outcome of a culture moving towards women’s full equality. In this sense, the campaign contests the state, but in a reconciliatory approach. In other words, the campaign articulates a challenge to the state to live up to the way it has positioned itself as a modern, rights-securing Islamic state.

Along with these discursive strategies, I explore the ways in which the campaign also uses a grassroots, bottom-up method that emphasizes face-to-face interaction. Before the 2009 presidential election, and the intense crackdown on activists that followed, campaigners went door-to-door and sometimes gathered in public spaces to collect signatures and to talk with people about how to change women’s legal status. Campaigners emphasize inclusivity and non-elitism, and have built a decentralized, flexible network of activists inside and outside of Iran.

The discursive frameworks of the campaign, I argue, are Islamic human rights and harmonizing law with culture. These are embedded in a bottom-up, non-elitist method and horizontal network structure, which help legitimize the campaign as an indigenous

project of Iranian feminists seeking to engage the state in its own project of delivering women's equality under Islam.

But the state often cracks down on the campaign, accusing it of receiving Western support and therefore of threatening national security. Indeed, the campaign network is transnational, with significant involvement from the Iranian diaspora. The geopolitical context in which the campaign operates—the consolidation of power by the hardliners within the Iranian state, the effects of the post-9/11 period, including Islamophobia and the War on Terror, and the U.S. policies towards Iran of isolation, containment, sanction and rhetorical war—makes it vulnerable to accusations that it is a Western-backed project. In Chapter 3, I explore the dilemmas of working transnationally in such a context. Through interviews with campaign activists in Southern California, I examine how the campaign negotiates its vulnerability to being targeted by the Iranian state.

I also locate the campaign within the context of transnational feminism and its perils and promises, and show how the campaign offers an alternative understanding of transnational politics to that of what I call feminist governmentality. Drawing on Grewal (2005), I consider how various modes of transnational feminist discourses, like women's rights as human rights, have extended the colonial project of "saving" Middle Eastern and Muslim women, and have consolidated hierarchies of power between "liberated" Western women and "oppressed" women from the global South.

Yet, a central claim of my dissertation and of this chapter in particular, is that transnational feminist politics must not be abandoned because they risk contamination by feminist governmentality. In fact, such a move further silences the vibrant, complex activist and intellectual projects of women like those in the One Million Signatures

Campaign. If transnational feminist theory offers an alternative framework to that of global sisterhood by destabilizing the universal category of “woman,” foregrounding the historical and political specificity of women in different contexts, and formulating new theories of power and agency that illuminate women’s connections along axes of shared struggle, it must not now be relinquished because it fails to offer complete immunization from transnational governmentality. Instead, transnational feminist theory and politics must be continually rethought and retheorized based on the contributions of transnational feminist projects like the One Million Signatures Campaign.

As I listened to the discourses, strategies, methods and reflections of the campaigners I interviewed, it became immediately clear that they were offering novel ways of working and thinking transnationally. For one, they recognized their complex social, geographical and political locations as first-generation Iranians working in the heart of empire. They negotiate this positionality constantly, using their authority as Iranians and their affective ties to campaigners inside of Iran to counter claims coming from parts of the Iranian diaspora that change from within Iran is impossible. Those claims emanate primarily from secular Iranians hostile to Islamic discourses of any kind. The campaigners also use the relatively “free” room to organize and assemble openly within the U.S., yet also challenge the notion that the U.S. is a space of ultimate freedom. In fact, they posit the methods of the campaign as useful for activists in the U.S., given the ongoing sexism of U.S. culture. This analysis marks a rupture in transnational flows that move from West to rest and challenges the regime of feminist governmentality.

Altogether, the discursive and methodological work of the One Million Signatures Campaign’s transnational network is both effective and affective. I locate its efficacy in

the deeply inclusive horizontal network structure that allows anyone who agrees with the campaign tenets to join in, and in the pragmatic politics it uses to frame its demands. At the same time, the politics of solidarity that the campaign builds across national lines produces an affective space of hope and possibility for change from within Iran that I argue is crucial in countering both the modes of despair and cynicism about Iran, and the dangerous interventions by Western powers “on behalf” of Iranians.

This effective and affective politics is elaborated in Chapter 4 through a close reading of the writings of Shirin Ebadi, and an analysis of the ways in which her discourses have circulated transnationally. A Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2003, Ebadi was the first Iranian Muslim woman to receive such an award, and the award projected the discourses of Islamic feminism onto the transnational stage. Like the One Million Signatures campaigners, Ebadi articulates the compatibility of Islam with human rights discourses and uses the interpretive strategies of Islamic feminism to make claims for women’s equality.

I also do a close reading of Ebadi’s memoir, *Iran Awakening* (2007). I consider the ways in which Ebadi has insisted on staying and working within Iran as part of a political commitment to reform from within. Although Ebadi has been forcibly exiled since the post-2009 election crackdown, she rejects chosen exile and departure from Iran. I argue that this political choice, articulated transnationally through her memoir, works to rupture the framing of Iran as an ultimate prison. Ebadi offers an alternative to the memoirs of Iranian women which work to shore up Westerners’ preconceived ideas about Iran and Islam as inherently repressive and oppressive. Ebadi offers a similarly pragmatic reform approach to that articulated by Islamic feminists and One Million Signature

campaigners, one that engages the state around its discourses of Islam, feminism, equality and rights. In so doing, Ebadi contributes to the affective space of hope and possibility so easily erased by memoirs that frame Iran as an impossible site of change.

I also consider Ebadi's refusal to accept the position of native informant. In the post-9/11 context, women's memoirs about fleeing Islam work to consolidate Islamophobic and Orientalist tropes of Islam and the Middle East. Such tropes gain legitimacy through the work of "insiders" who are seen to offer "authentic" accounts of Islam. When such native informants position themselves as feminists, as many of them do, the imbrication of feminism within the secular-liberal project of "refashioning" Islam becomes clear. This refashioning project is ideological and material, a shoring up of secular-liberal governance, and Western political and economic hegemony. Ebadi offers a critical alternative to such a project by articulating feminism and Islam as compatible, and insisting that it is Iranians themselves who will determine the political landscape and future of Iran.

Finally, I insist that we must develop transnational reading and reception practices that account for what Mani (1990) calls "discrepant audiences." In this geopolitical context, one might conclude that any feminist narratives emerging from the Muslim world and that circulate transnationally become contaminated by the regime of truth that is now globally hegemonic. Such a regime positions the West and the U.S. in particular as the ultimate sites of unmitigated freedom and democracy, and secular-liberalism as the only possibility for feminist agency. The mere existence of Ebadi's memoir in such a context leaves it vulnerable to different kinds of readings. In other words, without critical perspective on the secular-liberal regime of truth, some readers might focus solely on

Ebadi's particular hardships and misread her as a native informant. Yet an "aggrandizement" (Mani 1990) of these dangers can work to erase other reading and reception practices that Ebadi's memoir might assemble, thereby silencing the important claims to feminist agency within Iranian and Muslim contexts made by Ebadi. Building on Chapter 3, Chapter 4 makes room for the political and epistemic projects of Iranian and Muslim feminists so that scholars and activists might rethink and revitalize transnational feminist theory and practice.

Iranian Feminism and/in Transnational Feminist Praxis

As my project shifted, then came together through an interdisciplinary and multi-sited methodology, I began to understand the critical importance of situating my dissertation within the (sub)field of transnational feminist studies. On the one hand, the One Million Signatures Campaign is a profoundly local and indigenous effort. It emerged in response to local politics, and seeks to engage the state using discourses and strategies that are shaped by debates and discussions within Iranian society. On the other hand, my analysis of the campaign through narratives on the web and from interviews with activists also revealed the ways in which the discourses and debates about Islam, gender, feminism and rights had penetrated beyond elite circles to a wider constituency within and outside of Iran. My analysis also revealed how localized discourses and strategies also draw on the transnational sphere, not only in terms of where and how those discourses are traveling, but around what concepts, and through which political formations.

This new focus on the transnationalism of a particular moment in Iranian feminism began to animate my project in several ways. First, a consideration of local feminisms, such as Iranian and Islamic feminism, must account for the ways that local politics are always deeply embedded in and affected by global forces. The hostility of the U.S. towards the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the regime that came to power in the aftermath; the decades-long standoff between the U.S. and Iran; the Global War on Terror and the proliferation of Islamophobia; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the U.S. policies of containment, isolation, and sanctions against Iran, and the continual threat of invasion; these are some of the global governing factors in the everyday lives, practices and strategies of Iranian feminist activists.

Second, transnational feminist critiques of the universalizing and colonialist tendencies of global feminism, which have informed so much of my scholarly and political pursuits, can often reproduce some of the very relations of power they seek to expose. At times, the field of transnational feminist studies seems over-invested in critiquing the dangers of transnational feminist political engagement within the context of neocolonial governmentality. This overinvestment can lead to an epistemic silencing of the praxis of feminists who are trying to build transnational alliances despite the difficulties and dangers. My epistemological and methodological approaches unfolded critical and neglected dimensions of transnational feminist studies, that is, the discourses, practices, dilemmas, desires, and methods of the very feminists seeking such political transformations.

Studies of activists' lives—the very ideas, discourses, musing, reflections, and practices that inform their political work—are critically needed if we are to more fully

understand the constraints, dilemmas, and opportunities for transnational feminist work. In writing an account of activists' lives based largely on their own stories, I draw deeply from Ethel Brooks' idea of "living proof," or "the offering of life stories, subjectivities, bodily materialities, and practices by women as acts of courage and political claim staking" (2007, 138). While Brooks' research subjects are quite different from mine—garment workers along different points of transnational capitalist production—I borrow from her notion of the ways in which the living proof offered through the lives of women in struggle both becomes part of and exceeds the political and economic regimes of transnational governance.

Third, and perhaps most important of the claims I am making, activists in the One Million Signatures Campaign and the political and intellectual work of a Muslim feminist like Shirin Ebadi, both of which have drawn on and recast the contributions of Islamic feminism, have profoundly reanimated the possibilities for transnational feminist praxis. The foundational moment of transnational feminist praxis as an intellectual framework and political practice emerged in response to global crises that could not be, indeed have not been, solved by local or national movements and solutions. In fact, the very crises transnational feminist praxis addressed—war, neoliberal globalization, Western hegemony—have deepened and spread far beyond anyone's imagination.

Because of these conditions, for feminists and activists at this moment the swing between utter despair and wild hope is violent, a lurching back and forth that is as unpredictable as it is rattling. Each day brings more and worse news. And yet, while it is difficult to stay optimistic, the despair we are living with is repeatedly punctured here and there by signs of hope. These bright spots are emanating from activists on the ground,

many of them feminists, who refuse to accept the governing conditions of their lives, and seek out alternative ideas, politics, practices and visions. Animating my dissertation is a deep desire to learn from and take seriously the difficult work of one such set of activists and the particular knowledge they are producing through their work. This requires, in part, a surfacing of the deeply affective condition of activist life, my own included.

In this project, I consider the ways in which cynicism, despair and even intellectual critique can shrink the parameters of what is possible and alternatively, how the life force of hope might restructure feminist politics. Once again, Brooks' work guides my thinking through the possibilities and functions of such an intellectual, political and affective space of hope. If, as she writes, living proof "is evidence of and contributes to emotions that are part of the offering of love" (2007, 141-142), living proof is also constituted by and constitutive of hope. As living proof, the hope generated by the activists I researched and listened to exceeds and cannot be contained by the very forces that govern their, indeed all of, our lives.

As I explore in my conclusion, the political mobilizations appearing around the world in the last year have certainly excavated hope and possibility from the subterranean, as activists and citizens take back the vision of democracy from its enclosure by the institutions of neoliberal governmentality and empire. In the pages that follow, I theorize the practices, discourses and visions emanating from one group of Iranian feminists, who have made important contributions to the epistemic, political and affective reclamation of democratic possibility, and are helping revitalize and rethink the possibilities for and contours of transnational feminist practice.

Chapter 1

From Exegesis to Cyberspace: New Strategies in a Global Age

The door of research is open to all.

—Hojjat ol-Eslam Seyyed Mohsen Sa'idzadeh,
Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran

How do we understand women's mobilization in the contemporary period in Iran?

The protests that erupted after the June 2009 presidential elections, in which Mahmoud Ahmadienijad fraudulently declared himself president, included the mass participation of women, just as the Iranian revolution of 1979 did 30 years before, as most media accurately reported. But the popular media comparisons of the election protests to the revolution oversimplify both upsurges and elide the dynamic, contradictory and complex decades that both preceded and followed 1979.¹ This chapter provides some historical context for understanding the ways in which ideas about gender and feminism were mobilized under the modernizing secular, then Islamic, state in twentieth century Iran, and considers the conditions that gave rise to women's political mobilization in the current period. Challenging the ubiquitous narrative that women fared better under the secular state, I show how women's political engagement with the Islamic Republic originated from the bottom-up and has been much more broad-based than under the two previous secular regimes, which implemented feminist reforms from above.

¹ Roger Cohen's op-ed in the June 27, 2009 edition of the *New York Times* (Cohen 2009) is but one example of the way popular media has framed women's participation in the election protests along the "not since the Iranian Revolution" line without explicating the conditions that led to women's role in the election protests.

The era of the Pahlavi shahs (1925-1979), first Reza Shah, then his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, witnessed the implementation of a modernizing program that held the question of women's role and status as central. Its particular reforms benefited primarily middle and upper-class urban women, but excluded many rural, poor and working-class women. Women's political engagement came mostly through nationalist frameworks handed down by the state.

As a response to economic and political injustice, and a challenge to decades of Western-backed dictatorship, the revolution of 1979 mobilized broad sectors of Iranian society, including massive numbers of women. The revolutionary discourses emerging from two key theorists, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Shari'ati, located women's equality within Islam, a project seen as restoring women's dignity lost under the Pahlavi shahs.

The revolutionary state mobilized and educated women who had been excluded from the modernizing projects of the Pahlavi era; at the same time, it reproduced the exclusionary apparatus of the secular state that preceded it, albeit in a different form. Subsequently, women were locked out of the revolutionary project in key ways. But the post-revolutionary period enabled women to exploit what became the major paradox of the Islamic Republic. A politically mobilized and highly educated female citizenry, who were promised equality under Islam, now faced legal barriers to their full participation in society. This led to the emergence of new forms of feminism that challenged the state using its own Islamic discourses of rights and equality.

I consider the rise of feminist activity in the post-revolutionary period, particularly in the 1990s. I look at the ways that social, cultural and economic realities

clashed with the legal setbacks imposed by the Islamic Republic, generating a new movement of Muslim and secular feminists, Islamist women, and Islamic feminists who pushed the state to deliver on its promises of equality. As women's political engagement grew, national debates about gender, Islam, women's rights and feminism in Iran proliferated in the press, and in reformers' engagements with the state. Women activists, particularly those working within an Islamic framework, made inroads into Parliament in the form of shaping national laws regarding women. More importantly, because they worked within the parameters of Islamic discourse, they were able to make demands on the state to fulfill its obligations to women.

I then go on to consider how the decline of the formal reform period, marked by the end of the Khatami era (1997-2005), and increasing control of Parliament and then the presidency by hardliners has forced feminists to turn to new strategies for engaging the state. From 2005 on, feminists, many of whom were participating in debates in the women's press, turned to organizing rallies, many of which were shut down. That experience led to the emergence of an innovative signatures gathering campaign, which I discuss in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. I argue that the success of feminists in the 1990s at legitimizing women's interpretive discourses about Islam and gender justice, which took place primarily among elite women and men (literary, intellectual, public figures) have been taken up by feminist activists in their everyday discourses and practices, and found resonance in the lives of ordinary women and men. Concomitantly, new media technologies and new access to the Internet by women have facilitated innovative political strategies and led to new feminist discourses about women's rights and equality. Indeed, all of these forces led to the emergence of a transnational campaign, the One

Million Signatures Campaign, which now has deep resonance and support among citizens in Iran and transnationally. Altogether, I show how, contrary to the hegemonic narrative about women's status under the Islamic Republic, discourses about women's rights, equality and feminism have been developing and taking root in the post-revolutionary period as never before, and are moving into and shaping the transnational sphere with the rise of new feminist networks.

The Modern Women's Movement: Statehood and Gender in Historical Perspective

Discourses of gender, in particular women's role in family and society, are frequently mobilized in nation-building projects. Iran is no exception, as the era of Pahlavi rule (1925-1979) attests to. While this dissertation focuses on the current period of women's engagement with the Islamic Republic, established in 1979 and still in power today, it's important to recognize that the founding of a strong state, with its requisite mobilization of women and gender ideologies, happened many years before the revolution. Indeed, with the infrastructure of the modernizing state established by the Pahlavis, the Islamic Republic can be seen as a contiguous project of powerful modern statehood, albeit with different emphases.

State feminism and top-down modernization

In her epic study of women and politics in twentieth century Iran, Paidar (1995) argues that women's participation in the political processes and struggles of modern Iran have a deep historical basis. In the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, largely a movement for political reform of the corrupt Qajar dynasty (1796-1925), and to establish

Iran and a modern nation independent of colonial (British and Russian) influence and intrusion, women were key players. As with most nation-building projects, the “woman question” was inseparable from the national question. According to Paidar, as “the very idea of women’s emancipation was grounded in the need for national progress,” issues of women’s education, age of marriage and practices within the family were taken up and debated (1995, 75). Women’s involvement in the Constitutional Revolution “was the beginning of a new era for women in Iran. ... [It] created the opportunity for women to organize and establish a women’s movement with the long-term aim of women’s emancipation” (1995, 76). Similarly, Afary argues that women “were at the very heart of the revolution, defining its scope, its limitations, and its political directions” (1996, 3).

The Constitutional Revolution achieved political reform through the establishment of a parliamentary democracy in which Shi’i clergy and secularists shared leadership (Paidar 1995, 70-71), pointing to the ways in which modern statehood and political movements in Iran cannot be discerned along a strict religious/secular binary. Despite its notable successes, the revolution was not successful at social and economic reforms, and “the Qajar state remained weak, corrupt and vulnerable to political manipulation by Western powers” (Paidar 1995, 78). Combined with the political turmoil of the Russian Revolution and uprisings in the Iranian provinces of Gilan and Azerbaijan, many sectors, including the “clergy, the non-socialist Majles deputies and the British,” “supported the idea of a strong state to quell the spread of socialist ideology in Iran” (Paidar 1995, 79).

The era of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-41) can be defined as that of nation building focused on the establishment of the state as the epicenter of national leadership (Paidar

1995, 78). As such, it took on the role of providing services like health, education and transportation for citizens who were seen to be interpellated uniformly by a strong and nationally united state (Paidar 1995, 81). The state-building project also entailed the establishment of a national army. “As the army succeeded in establishing central authority in the country, the state rose in power and authority above all social groups and soon became the most powerful institution in Iran” (Paidar 1995, 81). As Paidar notes, the project of modern statehood, with its economic, bureaucratic and militarized apparatuses, was a coercive one (81).

The state as the embodiment of society undertook the construction of a nation state in Iran. The new nation state was conceived on the basis of a particular definition of modernity and progress which included the imitation of certain aspects of Western societies and the exclusion of others. The main features of this model were a central state, a unified nation, a single language and religion, the secularization of society and national sovereignty, technological progress, economic development and the emancipation of women. In all this, the state selected what to include and what to exclude from Western models to make up the Iranian model of a nation state, and amongst the items excluded were democracy and individual rights. (Paidar 1995, 81-82)

Among the top-down reforms for women established by Reza Shah was compulsory unveiling in 1936. While the right to unveil was a demand of a small number of elite women and reformers for decades before Pahlavi rule, the compulsory and violent installation of unveiling proved the top-down, coercive power of the state. Police, ordered by Reza Shah, violently removed veils from women appearing with them in public. Naturally, this created deep resentment among women who chose to veil. While secular fundamentalists, who currently insist on the putative superiority and tolerance of secularism, incessantly focus on the Islamic Republic’s compulsory veiling policies, often forgotten is this period of Iranian history, when violent and compulsory unveiling was part of the modernization process imposed by Reza Shah. What this shows is that

Iran has a long history of state coercion, with roots in the secular era of the Pahlavis. Far from being a neutral project, secular modernity has deeply violent beginnings, with women's bodies as collateral damage.

Indeed, as Najmabadi (1998) argues, the history of modern Iran is a gendered one, as ideas about "women" and "men," and "masculinity" and "femininity" were constructed and reconfigured in particular ways. The protection of women's bodies and sexuality by men signaled a unified and integral nation, with proper masculine and feminine subjects. Revisiting the Constitutional period, Najmabadi argues:

The gendered construction of such central notions of modernity has in turn had significant political consequences for how the changes in notions of gender, and in particular of womanhood, were articulated in the emergence of Iranian modernity. To have envisaged the homeland as a female body, whose purity constituted male honor and who was in need of male protection, created a discursive space within which woman-as-citizen landing in a conflictive domain, at once claiming parity yet subject to male protection. (Najmabadi 1998, 183)

As Najmabadi shows, the modernizing project in Iran cannot be read as simply an emancipatory one. As with the contemporary period, the Constitutional period and the era of the Pahlavis each enabled and constrained women's possibilities in particular kinds of ways, through the regulation of not only women's bodies but gendered ideologies.²

In more recent work, Najmabadi explores how Iranian modernity hinged on the production of a heterosocial world which disavowed homosociality, homoeroticism and same-sex affectivity. She considers how gender differentiation worked to "structur[e] ... notions of beauty, desire, and love" (2005, 59) into a newly heterosexualized register made intelligible by a gendered modernity. Heterosociality and its complementary heterosexuality become naturalized through the assignation of a gender binary to

² See also Moallem (2005) for an analysis of the Iranian modernity produced through the 1979 revolution and the ways in which it hinged on gendered ideals of political engagement.

“modern” men and women. Najmabadi further argues that women’s claims for equality also did the cultural work of disavowing homosociality and reproducing the ideal of heterosociality and heterosexuality. In response to Shahnaz Azad, an early twentieth century campaigner for women’s unveiling and educational equality who analogizes women’s and men’s equality to wheels of a carriage, each needing to function to make the whole carriage work, Najmabadi writes:

Azad’s image of the wheels of a carriage was more than a metaphor for equality. It envisaged a coupling of man and woman in a common goal, as partners in the civilizational drive of Iranian modernity. It thus imagined modernity as a heterosocial pursuit, with modern man and woman as necessary complementary parts of a whole. For homosocial Iranian womanhood to imagine modernity as heterosocial was a radical move. While empowering women’s claims to equality, it harnessed this project to the heteronormalizing dynamic of Iranian modernity. (Najmabadi 205, 231)

As Najmabadi shows, feminist claims to women’s equality, unveiling and the heterosocial world of modern citizenship depended on men’s and women’s relinquishing of their homosocial worlds, reinforcing and reproducing binaries around gender and sexuality. Her work uncovers the violence contained within the state’s modernizing project and women’s complicity in such a project.

For Reza Shah, gendered ideas of the nation were violently enacted on women’s bodies through mandatory unveiling. Reza Shah’s successor, his son, Mohammed Reza Shah (the Shah), consolidated the top-down and violent nationalist project of his father. During his reign (1941-79), which witnessed the British-American coup d’état of popular nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mosadeq, the Shah continued top-down reforms and fortified the repressive apparatuses of the state. The Shah mobilized a discourse of Iran as a “Great Civilization,” recalling the era of Cyrus and Darius, when non-Islamic kings with powerful armies ruled prosperous, Western-style civilizations (Paidar 1995,

148). Throughout the 1950s and well into the 1970s, the Shah consolidated the repressive apparatus of the state. SAVAK, the secret police, was established in 1957 with CIA and then MOSAD support (Paidar 1995, 135). The political repression, imprisonment and executions of those opposed to the Shah were extreme. During the Shah's reign, "SAVAK grew to a total of over 5,300 full-time agents and a large but unknown number of part-time informers" (Abrahamian 1982, 436).

Under the Shah, a more independent women's movement emerged, although the largest women's organization, the Women's Organization of Iran, was deeply tied to the Shah's top-down control of political power. Most of the reforms in health, fertility and education of the Shah benefited middle and upper-class women. By 1976, the literacy rate among rural women was only 16.5 percent, a mere 15 percent increase over twenty years (Paidar 1995, 162). Even for middle and upper-class women, ideas about the patriarchal control of women in the family remained dominant. By the late 1970s, deep resentment of the Shah's modernizing program, which was not only coercive but shut out vast sectors of society had infiltrated many corners of Iran. Since the early 1960s, religious opposition to the Shah had been building, and by the late 1970s, religious and secular forces came together to overthrow the notorious Western-backed dictator of Iran.

Revolution: Islamist discourses of Khomeini and Shari'ati

The Iranian Revolution was a broad-based oppositional movement against the corrupt dictatorship of Mohammed Reza Shah. The revolutionary coalition "included an array of political groups (leftists, nationalists, and Islamists) and social forces (women and men of the middle classes, the intelligentsia, the working class, and the urban poor)"

(Moghadam 2002, 17). The state and its ideological theorists mobilized a discourse of gender equality that gave women a key role in the revolution. Ali Shari'ati, the popular leftist Islamic theorist of the revolution, gave frequent lectures based on his book, *Fatima is Fatima*.³ Drawing on the founding period of Islam, Shari'ati argued that women should emulate Fatima, the prophet Muhammad's daughter, who was "the center of a family of fighters. She took on responsibilities and became socially engaged, equally to men but in a different way" (Keddie 2003, 205). As Keddie argues, Shari'ati formulated this "separate but equal" doctrine as an antidote to the West's notion of a liberated woman, hyper-individualistic and sexually objectified, but also in response to women's seclusion within patriarchal notions of Islam. In this sense, he appealed to national anti-imperialist sentiments that ran deep during the reign of the Shah (2003, 205).

Shari'ati put forth an ideal of womanhood that challenged both what he saw as traditionalist patriarchy and European or Western feminism:

The woman of the Third World must be one who selects, who makes a choice. She is the woman who neither accepts the inherited mould nor the imported novelty. She recognizes both of them. She knows and is aware of both of them. The one which is imposed upon her in the name of tradition which she inherits, is not related to Islam at all but is related to ethnic customs of the period of paternalism and even slavery. And the one which is imported from the West is not science, not humanity, not freedom and not liberty. It is not based on sanctity and respect for women at all. Rather it is based on the low tricks of the bourgeoisie—stupefying consumerism and mindless self-indulgence. (Shari'ati 1996, 66)

Shari'ati framed the new Muslim woman as an "authentic" response to old forms of patriarchy and "foreign" ideas about women's freedom.

Part of Shari'ati's appeal was his emphasis not just on the new Muslim woman as an antidote to the putative liberated Western woman, but on Islam as that which rescued women from the misogynist pre-Islamic cultures of the Arab world. Using the story of

³ Included with other writings in *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman* (1996).

Fatima, Shari'ati built a strong case for the ways in which Islam granted women dignity, agency and rights previously unknown to them. As the youngest child of Muhammad and his first wife Khadija, Fatima was chosen, along with her father, to revolutionize the society to which she was born. Islam “revolutionizes the position of women” (Shari'ati 1996, 159) because in pre-Islamic, patriarchal Arabia, where daughters are not valued as sons are, Fatima's fate was supposedly determined. Muhammad's two sons died in early childhood, and his three daughters with Khadija—Zaynab, Ruqiya and Umm Kulthum—died before Muhammad did. When Khadija became pregnant later in life, a son was eagerly anticipated. “But once again, a daughter. They named her Fatima” (Shari'ati 1996, 156). Fatima becomes the “final link in this chain of divine justice ... the last daughter of a family who had anticipated a son” (Shari'ati 1996, 159).

Through the story of Fatima's role in her family, Shari'ati sought to evoke a sense of pride and capacity in women's gendered roles. Fatima studied, worked and fought alongside of her father, became his confidant, and also comforted for him. She became known as “the mother of her father” (Shari'ati 1996, 164) because of her capacity to nurture and take care of Muhammad through the many difficulties his life presented. Her role in Muslim history is more complex than this brief discussion reveals, but my concern here is to show how central the discussion of women was to key Islamist thinkers like Shari'ati. Analogizing the 1979 revolution with the early revolutionizing structures of Islam through the story of Fatima, Shari'ati offers a discursive structure through which many women found resonance.

Like Shari'ati, but from a conservative or traditionalist perspective, Ayatollah Khomeini argued for women's freedom within Islam. He asserted that “as for women,

Islam has never been against their freedom. It is, to the contrary, opposed to the idea of woman-as-object and it gives her back her dignity” (quoted in Sanasarian 1982, 117).

Khomeini, too, drew on a growing critique of “Westoxification,” the consumerist, sexually exploitative and individualist trends thought to be promoted by the West. In a speech to a group of women in the holy city of Qom in early March, 1979, Khomeini asserted:

We want our women to attain the high rank of true humanity. Women must have a share in determining their destiny. The repressive regime of the Shah wanted to transform our warrior women into pleasure-seekers, but God determined otherwise. They wanted to treat woman as a mere object, a possession, but Islam grants woman a say in all affairs just as it grants man a say. All the people of Iran, men and women alike, must repair the ruins that the previous regime has bequeathed to us; the hand of men alone will not suffice to accomplish the task. Men and women must collaborate in this respect. (Khomeini 1985, 264)

Indeed, Khomeini’s discourse positioned women as key agents in transforming Iranian society. He contrasted women’s new role as revolutionary agents with their object status under the Shah, a passive position created by capitalist consumption and sexual exploitation.

Additionally, Khomeini harkened back to the founding of Islam, arguing that Islam gave women’s rights they previously did not have:

When women wish to marry, there are certain prerogatives they can stipulate for themselves that are contrary neither to the shari’a nor to their own self-respect. For example, a woman can stipulate that if her future husband turns out to be of corrupt moral character or if he mistreats her, she would possess the right to execute a divorce. This is a *right* that Islam has granted to women. If Islam has imposed certain restrictions on both women and men, it is for the benefit of both. Similarly, just as Islam has granted man the right to divorce, it has also granted it to woman, on the condition that the parties stipulate at the time of the marriage that if the husband behaves in a certain manner, the wife will have the right to execute a divorce. Once the man has accepted such a stipulation, he can never repudiate it. Apart from making it possible to include such a stipulation in the marriage contract, Islam forbids the husband to mistreat his wife; if he habitually

mistreats her, he is to be punished and the mujtahid will grant the wife a divorce. (Khomeini 1985, 264, emphasis added)

Interesting here is both the assertion of rights as inherent within Islam, and the intimation that these rights were lost under the old regime, and could be retrieved under the new one.

Indeed, as I elaborate in Chapter 2, rights talk in Iran has emanated from many different corners, as part and parcel of a rich culture of debate about how those rights are made meaningful. Khomeini gave this speech just after repealing the 1967/1975 Family Protection Law. As Afary notes, the Women's Organization in Iran pressured the Shah to implement legal reforms for women, and the implementation of the Family Protection Law and the Family Protection courts ensured some limited rights in divorce, custody and marriage (2009, 216). But because the Shah had such deep ties to the West, many more conservative and traditional sectors found the law controversial. Indeed, Khomeini argued not against women's rights per se, but that the Family Protection Law imitated Western trends and undermined the Muslim family by separating rights from obligations and duties (Keddie 2003).

As Khomeini's and Shari'ati's rhetoric reveal, the Islamic revolution sought to restore women's dignity, freedom and rights, assumed to be lost under a Western-backed dictatorship, through a reevaluation of her central role in the family. In revolutionary Iran, women were incorporated into a national vision that promised them equal rights and an important role in defending the revolution – albeit within the confines of their role as central family figures, i.e., wives, mothers, sisters, daughters. Shari'ati's valorization of Fatima and Khomeini's claims for gender equality under Islam carried enormous appeal for women, particularly working-class women who felt shut out of the Shah's

economically stratified Iran, and conservative and religious women who were excluded from a forced secular public space.

Moreover, as Keddie (2003) argues, the long history of anti-imperialist thought in the 19th and 20th centuries in Iran, which came from both secular and religious circles, emerged in new forms after the 1960s. As a response to the Shah's cultural Westernization, which signaled "Western politico-economic domination," (Keddie 2003, 189), new Islamic theorists like Shari'ati and Khomeini engaged with the tenets of Shi'i Islam to challenge the "governmental image of progress and Western rationalism" (Keddie 2003, 188), and to critique Western colonialism, imperialism and hegemony. Indeed, Khomeini's Islamic governance, *Velayat-e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurists), which he set up after the revolution, was based on the idea that the political and legal revelations of God as told to the Prophet, which led to the founding of Islam in the 7th century, are known best by the Muslim jurists, and all a society needs to be governed. Like other Islamist theorists, Khomeini looked to the particular contests and debates of the foundational period of Islam to make Islam "the symbol of a national struggle against monarchy ... and raise politics to its just position" (Keddie 2003, 190).

In this brief exploration of Islamist theorists Shari'ati and Khomeini, my aim is not to offer a thorough analysis of their rhetoric, but to consider why their respective discourses were compelling to many women, particularly those who felt excluded from the nation-building projects of the Pahlavis. Both theorists spoke primarily at the level of abstract or generalized philosophy, making it difficult to anticipate the extent to which at least Khomeini's actual practices in regards to women would contradict his ideology.

And both theorists mobilized the deep anti-colonial and anti-imperialist sentiment among many sectors of Iran.

But as the revolutionary regime began repealing some of women's rights within the family, workplace and public, and failed to institute programs that reflected its ideological rhetoric, Iranian women began to contend with a politics of national exclusion. In understanding the Islamist discourses of the revolution, and the set of historical forces that came to play after the revolution, one can understand how it is that women, once they faced barriers to their full participation in society, began to draw on those very discourses to challenge their exclusion from key sectors of society.

Reform: New Religious Thinking and the Rise of Islamic Feminism

Scholars have identified the post-revolutionary period in Iran as one of simultaneous closures and openings for women (Ashfar 1998; Hoodfar 1999; Moghadam 2002; Moghadam 2003; Paidar 2002). The mandatory imposition of *hejab* (veiling), exclusion from certain occupations and educational fields, and the repeal of women's rights within the family signaled a serious defeat for women who had been promised greater equality under revolutionary Islam. But it was precisely that promise that enabled Muslim women activists to push to exchange the "emblem of Islamification" (Afshar 1998) for actual reforms in society. Additionally, in the decade-and-a-half following the revolution, Iran experienced what Valentine Moghadam (2002) describes as contradictory phenomena that would open up political space for women, destabilize the regime and give rise to the reform movement. The Iran–Iraq war of 1980–8 created employment opportunities for women; the death of Khomeini and presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi-

Rafsanjani encouraged liberal clerics to support economic liberalization; and a population explosion forced the state to launch a successful family planning campaign, which gave women access to contraception (Moghadam 2002, 18–20). Perhaps the most important legacy of the revolution was the creation of a vast social welfare state with programs and services that dramatically increased literacy rates and life expectancy for women and men, reduced the birth and fertility rates of women, and increased the percentage of women in universities.

Louise A. Halper (2010) offers the following compendium of data, which signals the vast material improvements in women’s lives in the post-revolutionary period.

With respect to literacy, illiterates as a percentage of Iranian women 15 to 24 declined from over a third in 1980 to less than 10 percent in 2000. Over the same period, the illiteracy rate for the entire population of adult women was cut in half, from about 60 percent to about 30 percent. As for education, the number of women in secondary school as a percentage of the eligible age group more than doubled from about 30 percent to almost 80 percent. As of 1999, for every 100 boys in primary school, 96 girls were enrolled, indicating that boys and girls were almost equally likely to be learning basic literacy and numeracy skills. In 2000, half of all Iranian university students were women, as were 60 percent of entering students, who were selected on the basis of a difficult nationwide exam. Twenty-seven percent of working-age women were in the labor force as of 2000, up from 20 percent in 1980. In terms of health, life expectancy went up by 11 years between 1980 and 2000 for both Iranian men and women. With respect to family planning, “levels of childbearing have declined faster than in any other country” [Roudi-Fahimi 2002], going from 5.6 births per woman in 1985 to 2.0 in 2000, a drop accomplished by a voluntary, but government-sponsored, birth-control program. (Halper 2010, 3-4)

As Halper argues, these changes reflect the “redistributive character of the Islamic Republic,” which has “readjusted the share of national wealth going to lower-income quintiles” (2010, 4).

The introduction of “schools, medical clinics, roads, electricity and piped water into the countryside” (Abrahamian 2009, 13) further contributed to the overall

improvement in life conditions and opportunities for Iranian women. It is in this post-revolutionary period, particularly in the last decade and a half, that women have emerged as key agents of many important changes in the social, political and cultural landscape of Iran.

The economic and social realities of post-revolutionary Iran and a highly educated and politicized population led to a vibrant and diverse reform movement in the mid-1990s. Women, students, clerics and ordinary citizens were able to push for and win reforms by challenging the hardliners' interpretations and applications of Muslim law. During Khatami's presidency, female MPs, backed by the reform movement, organized to reform the Iranian civil code. For instance, the legal age of marriage for girls was raised from 9 to 13 years old in 2002.⁴ As a member of the Women's Faction of the Reformist Parliament (the Sixth Parliament, 2000-2004), Elaheh Koolaee worked with other women parliamentarians and their male supporters to change "some articles of civil law that were against women [*sic*] rights" (Koolaee 2009, 58).

Muslim women activists working within a politico-religious framework, who supported the revolution but found themselves subsequently shut out, were key players in this movement. These activists ranged from conservative Islamist women to self-identified Islamic feminists. Some shared a desire for reforms in favor of women's equal rights, while others were against reforms but still active politically themselves. All of these activists were part of a larger reform period, which ushered in reform president Mohammed Khatami in 1997 and formally ended in 2004, with the exclusion of reform

⁴ In practice, however, the median age of marriage for women is 22.

candidates from the parliamentary elections and the hardliners' rise to power.⁵

Islamic feminists, like those associated with the now closed-down women's journal *Zanan*,⁶ (re)entered the public political sphere through a vast and burgeoning press by engaging in *ijtehad*, rational engagement with the Qur'an in the spirit of one's historic context, alongside the "new wave" of religious reformers (Mir-Hosseini 1999). In using the term "Islamic feminism," I follow Margot Badran's definition: "[I]t is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (2009, 242). Badran rightly claims that those using Islamic feminist discourses may or may not use "Islamic feminist" to describe themselves. Those producing such discourses "also include religious Muslims (by which is typically meant the religiously observant), secular Muslims (whose ways of being Muslim may be less publicly evident), and non-Muslims" (Badran 2009, 244). As Roxanne Marcotte argues, the definition and political meaning of Islamic feminism has been much debated, making it important to identify different meanings.

One understanding of the term applies to what might constitute an explicit project for the betterment of women's situation within the framework of Islam. As such, the term becomes a useful analytical tool for shedding some light on Muslim women's writings and activities. A second understanding of the term consists of an identity that individuals consciously claim for themselves. While many Muslim women would not endorse the use of the term "Islamic feminism" to describe themselves and what they do, many of their writings and activities, nonetheless, aim at the betterment of women in Islam and can thus be understood in the first sense of the term. Islamic feminism, therefore, remains a valuable analytical category that can equally be applied to women who struggle for greater social or political roles for women within Islam, in spite of the constraints of their

⁵ By formal I mean at the level of electoral and parliamentary politics. At the grassroots, civil society level, the reform or opposition movement continues to the present post-2009 presidential election period.

⁶ The most well-known of the Islamic feminist press was the journal *Zanan*, shut down in 2008. Other publications include *Farzaneh*, *Zan*, *Badjens*, *Zan-e Rouz*, *Payam-e Zan*, and *Payam-e Hajjar*.

orthodox or traditional religious understandings and views. (Marcotte 2010, 133)

As an analytical framework, then, Islamic feminism encompasses various religious and political identities, some of which might seem to be at odds with one another. However, what is clearly more important in understanding Islamic feminism is the way in which its constituents share a desire to rectify what they consider the “wrongs and injustices” enacted in the name of Islam (Marcotte 2010, 132).

While there are Islamist women in Iran who did not favor feminist reforms and are therefore not Islamic feminists, their political activism and public presence make it difficult to draw too fine a demarcation. Additionally, as the next two chapters show, many secular women in Iran and the diaspora use Islamic feminist discourses as part of a pragmatic reform strategy within the particular context of Iran. As Badran argues, and as I claim throughout the dissertation, “the terms religious and secular are porous rather than rigid categories” (2009, 244). Indeed, as I show throughout the dissertation, the transnational circulation of Islamic feminist discourses has also fundamentally reanimated transnational feminism by breaking down many of the binaries associated with the religious/secular distinction: global South and North, traditional and modern, repressive and liberatory.

Badran (2006) claims that Islamic feminism is not a new phenomenon, although I assert that the ways in which it has proliferated and circulated globally are indicative of contemporary factors: women’s increased education, new media technologies, and the expansion of civil society. Badran argues that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Egypt, when Muslim women were engaging secular feminism, “Islam was salient in their gender thinking and activism.” Women engaged with “the ideas of Islamic modernism

advanced by Shaikh Muhammad Abduh (the famous late 19th and early 20th century Egyptian reformer) that were relevant to their lives as female Muslims” (Badran 2006, 3). What is new and striking in the contemporary period is the ways in which women’s increased education and literacy, access to ideas through print and cyber culture, and democratizing trends within their societies enabled women to make claims and speak with new kinds of authority about their lives within the parameters of Islam. As new “exegetes,” Iranian Islamic feminists reflected the social justice and equality vision of Islam back to those in authority who had promised, but not delivered, such a vision.

Islamic feminists in Iran, as elsewhere, argued that *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, or human understanding and execution of sacred law, should reflect the social justice vision of *sharia* – the sacred law, or will, of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Mir-Hosseini 1999; Mir-Hosseini 2006a). Many drew on a hermeneutics that looked to the ethical precepts of foundational Islam to “unread” past and present patriarchal Islams (Ahmed 1992; Barlas 2002). Islamic feminism in Iran proliferated in unprecedented ways precisely because the state’s Islamization project, in its failure to provide gender equality, paradoxically pushed women to criticize patriarchal codifications of Islam using the very discourses internal to Islam (Afshar 1998; Badran 2006; Mir-Hosseini 2006a). Moreover, women’s high education and literacy rates, and an expanding civil society facilitated their new roles as Qur’anic exegetes.

In her article, “The Experience of Islamic Feminism in Iran” in the Winter 2000 edition of the Iranian feminist journal, *Farzaneh*, Mahboobeh A. Gholizadeh writes: “Islamic feminism is more a social movement than an ideology or social theory. . . . Islamic feminism in Iran has a history of more than three decades. This movement has

tried to fill the social gaps resulting from the semi-traditional and quasi-modern character of Iranian society by insisting on the independent identity of Muslim women” (Gholizadeh 2000). Gholizadeh argues that the two post-revolutionary generations of Muslim feminists were influenced by two sets of religious reformers, followers of Dynamic Jurisprudence and advocates of the rational understanding of religion. Dynamic Jurisprudence was advanced by Ayatollah Morteza Motahari who, according to Gholizadeh, “favored the revision of the secondary elements of religion but not the basics” (Gholizadeh 2000). As a secondary element of religiosity, *ijtihad* can be constantly revised to accommodate temporal shifts in society, while keeping the foundations of religion intact. Gholizadeh asserted that rational religiosity, too, “considers *ijtihad* a secondary element of the religion. It is necessary in solving women’s problems but in and of itself is insufficient” (Gholizadeh 2000). As Gholizadeh claims:

[Followers of religious rationalism] believe that the real solution is in the *ijtihad* of the basic elements of religion and the achievement of new horizons. They consider the primary aspects of religion related to women’s situation as a reflection of the means of economic livelihood and culture at the time of revelation. This is essentially different from the point of view that insists on the holy nature and relevance related to revelation. For this reason ... many of the religious commands and rights related to women are seen as accidental and thus mutable. (Gholizadeh 2000)

While one theory argues for the flexibility of religious jurisprudence, and the other favors flexibility in religious knowledge of the foundational texts, both reform approaches work within the framework of Islamic texts, finding the basis for women’s equality there.

In the September 2004 edition of *Bad Jens*, reformist Alireza Alavitabar discussed the merits of considering Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, as pliable.

There are three reasons why Islamic *fiqh* should be regarded as accidental. Firstly, some of the precepts in *fiqh* are the result of questions that emerged out of accidents that could conceivably not have occurred. Secondly, *fiqh* is a human

science and it has been created to resolve disputes and establish order in society. Thirdly, *fiqh* is contingent. (Alavitabar 2004)

As I elaborate below, new religious thinkers stressed the historical contingency of *fiqh* and the fact that it is subject to human, or imperfect, knowledge.

Islamic feminists in the reform movement found support for their ideas in the two strategies of religious reform, and religious intellectuals and reformist clerics were frequently seen in the feminist press, like *Farazaneh*, *Zanan*, and *Bad Jens*. Particular attention was paid to the possibilities of women's right to reasoned interpretation. Fluent in the Qur'an, Shahla Sherkat, the publisher of *Zanan*, and other Muslim feminists argued for women's right to *ijtihad* (Moghadam 2002, 24). Sherkat, like her compatriots around the world, became one of many new feminist exegetes who "commanded considerable respect in the global umma," (Badran 2006, 3), or worldwide Muslim community of believers.

In her rich ethnographic study, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (1999), Ziba Mir-Hosseini explores, through writings, speeches and personal interviews with the reformers, the key ideas of the new wave of religious thinkers, clerics and lay people alike, who worked with and influenced Islamic feminists in Iran. Islamic feminists drew mostly on what she calls "the Modernists," the most progressive of these thinkers in terms of ideas about gender equality. Mir-Hosseini echoes others writing about Islamic feminism by pointing to the ways in which these reformers engage in Dynamic Jurisprudence, or as she explains, the idea that *fiqh* might be understood in relation to contemporary realities and understandings of the world (1999, 17). Two figures in particular, Abdolkarim Soroush and Hojjat ol-Eslam Sa'idzadeh, heavily influenced—and in Sa'idzadeh's case, worked with—Islamic

feminists during the height of the reform period. Unlike “the Traditionalists,” clerics who believe the patriarchal codifications of *sharia* are indisputable and so assume inequality between the sexes as natural (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 23), and “the Neo-Traditionalists,” who believe in the immutability of patriarchal *sharia* legal rulings but engage Dynamic Jurisprudence in their desire to acknowledge and incorporate new gender understandings, the Modernists “display a refreshing pragmatic vigor and a willingness to engage with nonreligious perspectives” (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 213). As Mir-Hosseini claims:

They no longer reject an idea simply because it is Western, nor do they see Islam as a blueprint with a built-in, fixed program of action for the social, economic, and political problems of the Muslim world. They argue that the human understanding of Islam is flexible, that Islam’s tenets can be interpreted to encourage pluralism and democracy, that Islam allows change in the face of time, space, or experience. (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 213)

As Mir-Hosseini argues, the Modernists’ views were aired regularly in the prolific press that marked the formal reform period, and both Soroush and Sa’idzadeh contributed to the thinking and intellectual frameworks of Islamic feminists, particularly those writing in *Zanan*. In the next section, I draw on Mir-Hosseini’s work (1999)—her interviews with Soroush and Sa’idzadeh—and my own reading of Abdolkarim Soroush (2000) to explore in depth the particular concepts that enabled Islamic feminists to put forward a gender equality framework from within the parameters of Islamic discourse.

Soroush

Mir-Hosseini calls Abdolkarim Soroush “perhaps the most influential and controversial thinker the Islamic Republic has so far produced” (1999, 217). Soroush is not a cleric, but rose to the ranks of Khomeini’s administration early after the revolution.⁷

⁷ Biographical data taken from Mir-Hosseini (1999) and Soroush’s official website, www.dr.soroush.com.

In 1981, Khomeini appointed him to the Council for Cultural Revolution, a seven-member committee established to completely refashion university curriculum after Khomeini shut down all universities, and oversee the reopening of the universities in 1983. Having obtained degrees in history and the philosophy of science in England in the 1970s, Soroush began teaching philosophy of science in Tehran University. He resigned from the council not long after the universities reopened, when he began to disagree with its direction. But “his lectures continued to be broadcast until the late 1980s and he remained close to the centers of power, acting as adviser to several government bodies until the early 1990s” (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 218).

During the 1990s, Soroush became more and more critical of the ruling clergy, and in *Kiyan*, a monthly magazine he co-founded, Soroush published controversial articles on topics like religious tolerance, the clergy, and interpretive strategies. In a 1995 edition, Mir-Hosseini claims that he argued “that the clergy as a group functions as a guild, with religion as their source of livelihood, which limits both their own freedom in interpretation and that of others” (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 219). During this period, Soroush was often harassed in public lectures by the vigilante group, Ansar-e-Hezbollah. Since 2000, Soroush has been in virtual exile, serving as a visiting scholar on Islam in prestigious Western universities.

In his writings, Soroush argues that religious reformers must reconcile eternity (the realm of religion) with temporality (the realm of religious understanding). He argues that what is constant, religion, and what is varied and variable, religious knowledge, cannot be determined prior to the understanding of religion. Religious knowledge, in other words, mediates religion. “Religion is in no need of reconstruction and completion.

Religious knowledge and insight that is human and incomplete, however, is in constant need of reconstruction” (Soroush 2000, 31). Soroush sought to bring an Islamic epistemology to contemporary Iran, arguing that reigning clergy, those not open to Dynamic Jurisprudence, did not have a theoretical paradigm, and therefore, could not acknowledge the ways in which their understandings of religion sat in for religion:

Although religion has no defect or flaw, defects abound in exegeses. The prophet is guilty neither of reticence nor of neglect in his task as the messenger of divine revelation; it is the human mind that is affected by need and neglect. Reason does not come to the aid of religion to complement it; it struggles to improve its own understanding of religion. The sacred shari’ah never sits parallel to human opinions, so there is no possibility of agreement or disagreement between the two; it is the human understanding of religion that may be congruous or incongruous with other parts of human understanding. (Soroush 2000, 31)

While Soroush rarely spoke directly to the question of gender in Islam, it is ideas about the distinction between religion and religious exegesis that made possible and supported the interventions Islamic feminists made and are still making. Not only did Soroush and other thinkers of the new wave push open the gates of *ijtihad*, they showed the compatibility of Islam with democracy through the insistence of the temporality of human understanding. In this sense, hard line clerics were challenged around their own interpretations of *sharia*, and feminists were able to bring contemporary realities to bear on religious understanding. As I show throughout the dissertation, particularly in chapters 2 and 4, Islamic feminists, in their own discourses, sounded the new wave of religious thinking back to everyday citizens, whose practices of and ideas about gender equality resonated with the notion that Islam could accommodate such elevations in women’s status.

Soroush spoke often about the act of submission to God as one of ultimate freedom. In this sense, he both challenged clerical coercion and facilitated new understandings of agency disaggregated from secularity.

True submission is predicated upon the principle of freedom; indeed, they are one and the same. Is there any merit in an imposed religion or forced prayers? Have we forgotten the Qur'anic verse: 'Let there be no compulsion in faith'? Have we not read the following statement by Noah in the Holy Qur'an: 'Shall we compel you to accept it when ye are averse to it'? Did not Pharaoh taunt his repentant sorcerers thus: 'Believe ye in Him before I give you permission?' Who would want to emulate Pharaoh and make people's beliefs contingent upon his decree? Religion is, by definition, incompatible with coercion. Freedom has two virtues: it endows life and the choices we make in it with meaning. (Soroush 2000, 96-97)

It is this insistence on religion as free from coercion that underlies Soroush's interest in articulating a society guided by religion as opposed to one guided by *fiqh*. Mir-Hosseini (1999) argues that this is part of Soroush's weakness, that his despair about the practitioners of *fiqh* in Iran has made him say little or nothing of women's legal status in Iran. Indeed, as Mir-Hosseini claims, Soroush refers less to specific *fiqh* rulings and more to broad philosophical ideas. But it is precisely these ideas that have emboldened Islamic feminists to make the legal claims Soroush refused to make.

First, in the sphere of women's rights we cannot think and talk only in *feqh* categories, of forbidden and permitted acts; we must also think in terms of interpreting religious texts, of man's and woman's purposes in creation, of traditions and social customs. Second, if Muslim scholars defined women's status in a way we find unacceptable today, it is not because they wanted to humiliate women or undermine their status, but because that is how they understood and interpreted the religious texts. Women in the past accepted their status not because they were stupid or oppressed but because they had no problems with such understanding and interpretation. In the past two centuries, however, the myths and theories that made such understandings acceptable to men and women have been challenged by scientific theories, including evolution. Changes in our worldview have also made women's legal rights an issue in Islam. Finally, the problem cannot be resolved by providing new justifications to defend an outmoded worldview, hoping women will be lured back into accepting them; after all, acceptance is a matter of belief rather than reasoning. What we can do is try to understand the basis for, and implications of, old and new views on women. Only

then can *women clarify for themselves where they stand in relation to each view, and where they want to be.* (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 230, emphasis added)

While on the one hand, Soroush is quite vague and indeed, soft on patriarchy, on the other hand, his emphasis on the interplay between religion and contemporary ideas and realities, and his invitation for women to articulate, on their own terms, what they think and want provides openings for feminist discourses that Soroush himself was unwilling to consider. By emphasizing the rational basis for religious understanding, Soroush created openings for women in Iran to produce new understandings and practices of feminist political agency. As a widely read and enormously popular thinker, Soroush insisted on women and other citizens as legitimate lay exegetes. While not an Islamic feminist himself, Soroush certainly fortified and helped validate the Islamic feminist praxis.

Sa'idzadeh

Hojjat ol-Eslam Seyyed Mohsen Sa'idzadeh is another of what Mir-Hosseini calls a Modernist thinker. He is “typical of a new breed of clerics who have matured with the Islamic Republic” (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 247).⁸ As Mir-Hosseini notes, Sa'idzadeh came out of the Qom Law School, established in 1979 to “train judges for the Revolutionary Courts” (1999, 248). He has been a judge and worked for the Ministry of Justice, but most of his life's work has been devoted to study. Sa'idzadeh is proficient in Qur'anic exegesis and hadith, and has been engaged in researching and writing about gender since 1988. He published most of his work on women and gender in the journals *Payam-e Zan* and *Zanan*, often under pseudonyms (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 248). In 1995, Sa'idzadeh participated in the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation Conference, the first man ever to

⁸ When quoting Sa'idzadeh himself, I will cite as (in Mir-Hosseini).

be invited, where he gave a paper on reconciling feminism with Islam (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 247).

Sa'idzadeh advocates, in his words, the "Equality perspective" (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 249). Unlike Soroush, Sa'idzadeh argues that *fiqh* is a critically important site for engaging a gender equality perspective. In his paper for the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation Conference, he wrote:

A substantial number of hadith and feqh theories obstruct the way to establishing equality between the sexes. A majority of jurists and all hadith specialists have sacrificed the Principle of equality in Islam to endorse a set of theories resting on assumptions that are no longer valid but still remain part of feqh. (Sa'idzadeh 1995, 31-34)

Because these assumptions are inside of *fiqh*, he argues, they must be disproved using, as Mir-Hosseini says, the "language and mode of argumentation" of *fiqh* itself (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 250).

In my reading of his in-depth interview with Mir-Hosseini, I argue that Sa'idzadeh emphasizes four critical points that enable feminists to engage a gender equality perspective within Islam. First, the principle of equality between the genders is inherent in Islam. Second, humans are endowed with rationality and reason, which allows them to engage religion, rather than simply obey without question. Third, the door of interpretation should not be in one group's hands, but open to all who have religious knowledge. And finally, Muslims must be separated from Islam, as it is Muslims who are the source of gender inequality, not Islam.

In his interview with Mir-Hosseini, Sa'idzadeh argues that equality, like freedom, is inherent in Islamic Principles, the spirit of Islam. He asserts that some jurists based their decisions on this Principle, though many "abandon the Principle" (in Mir-Hosseini

1999, 252). Sa'idzadeh argues that *fiqh* theories must be updated to reflect contemporary realities.

Of course, Islam is based on justice and human equality; it owes much of its advancement to equality—equality in every sense. But Jurists tended to leave gender out and focus on the rest; whereas I say we must oppose gender discrimination in the same way we oppose racial discrimination, since it discriminates between humans, and whatever does this is condemned—be it color, gender, or race. . . . The Jurists—some of them—have come to build a theory on a trivial instance, on a special, exceptional case for which conditions are even defined. [But] we can't base a theory on an instance and ignore the Principle. (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 252)

Sa'idzadeh argues that *fiqh* theories have been founded on the exceptions rather than the spirit or Principles that should inform them, but that there is precedence within *fiqh* for gender equality. He asserts that while some jurists made rulings based on the principle of equality, many jurists “have exceeded their mandate and constantly broken the limits, by adding things to the religion” (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 257).

Secondly, like Soroush, Sa'idzadeh emphasizes the importance of the human capacity to reason as the basis for faith without coercion or blind obedience. Endowed with the ability to understand the distinction between religion and interpretation, humans, he argues, “have the capacity to understand the reason for God's commands” (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 256). This emphasis leads to Sa'idzadeh's third key point, which is that while Islam needs trained interpreters, “the door of research is open to all” (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 258). When Mir-Hosseini asks if this contradicts the Shi'i doctrine of *taqlid*, “following the dictates of a mojtahed,” a “qualified (Shi'i) jurist who has reached the level of competence necessary to practice” *ijtihad* (1999, 282), Sa'idzadeh responds:

First, *taqlid* doesn't require suspension of one's critical faculty, it means you accept the authority of a person who is expert in matters of religious law. Such acceptance has a rational basis and exists in every field of science; for instance, I'm not an anthropologist and I accept your judgment in certain matters. This is

quite different from ta'bod, which means devotion, blind, unquestioning acceptance. Taqlid in Arabic comes from the root of "putting something on one's neck," by which one can be guided; that's to say, you choose to put it on and you can take it off when necessary. True, we're required to follow the practice of the Prophet, but we're also required to do so using our rational faculties; the problem is that religion and its laws have often been approached through ta'bod rather than taqlid.

Second, a mojtahed isn't in a position to issue a religious command. All he can do is merely state his opinion that an action is good or bad, in line with Islam or not; the rest is left to the believer. (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 258)

The emphasis on reason and choice offer a remarkably flexible and pragmatic understanding of human agency within religion. It's no wonder that feminists articulating the notion of gender equality worked with and drew on such understandings of new thinkers like Sa'idzadeh. As many feminist scholars working on religion have come to argue, religious practices of devotion, submission, and discipline are the very conditions for producing women's agency (Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005). If read only within a secular-liberal imaginary, things like submission and devotion to God are adjudicated as non-agential acts. As Sa'idzadeh shows, true religion is practiced only through human agency, reason and choice.

The fourth key point I have found in my reading of Sa'idzadeh's interview with Mir-Hosseini is his constant insistence on the difference between Muslims and Islam. Muslims, as humans, are flawed or limited, while Islam, as religion, is pure. In this sense, Sa'idzadeh echoes Soroush's theory of the difference between religious knowledge, temporally produced and bound by human life, and religion, that which is timeless and essential. Unlike Soroush, however, Sa'idzadeh moves out of vague philosophical frameworks to argue that because Islam granted women equality, when they faced obstacles and limits imposed by patriarchal actions, they resisted. In other words, women did not challenge Islam, but the very Muslims who abandoned Islamic principles.

Since Muslims couldn't deny the Principle of equality and freedom, they had to contain it by turning exceptions into rules. When we look into it, we see limitations introduced one by one: first it was said that women shouldn't go to war, then that they shouldn't walk in the middle of the street, and finally that they shouldn't walk in the streets at all. The same with women's right to express their views. First it was said that women can talk with men, but not for very long, then not more than two words, and finally they shouldn't talk at all with unrelated men. *I think there was a political edge to it. Women were among the early advocates of Islam, took part in wars, and played an important role in bringing it to power. Naturally they were going to ask for their share in the state that rules in the name of Islam, but this would undermine the interests of those who sought power, so women had to be marginalized. It was a question of power and worldly gain. These were the doings of Muslims, not Islam; and that's why women protested to the Prophet* (in Mir-Hosseini 1999, 264, emphases added).

This is a remarkably powerful passage, with deep theoretical and political implications for feminists. First, Sa'idzadeh acknowledges the power struggle in the founding of Islam. It is the political consolidation of power by patriarchal men that leads to the containment of and restrictions on women's role in society. Second, he points to the deep participation and crucial role women had in, as he says, bringing Islam to power. Unlike Khomeini and Shari'ati, who rely on a notion of women's equality which depends on their role as gendered beings within the family, Sa'idzadeh recognizes women's role in the founding of Islam as equal participants, stakeholders and agents. Finally, it is precisely because of their central role as makers of history that push women to protest patriarchal practices. This recuperation of the founding period of Islam as one characterized by equality for women, women's power struggles with patriarchy, and the deep claims women had on Islam and what an Islamic society should look are also elaborated by many feminist scholars of Islam who are making claims for the inherent gender justice framework within Islam (Ahmed 1992; Barlas 2002; Wadud 1999). Indeed, a reexamination and reclaiming of the founding period of Islam as one which enabled and facilitated equality for women is at the heart of Islamic feminist praxis.

As a key thinker in the new wave of religious scholars who came of intellectual and political age in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran, Sa'idzadeh offers an extraordinarily solid and authoritative basis for feminist readings and practices within Islam. His willingness to engage with feminist reformers vis-à-vis the press, and his thoughtful collaboration with Mir-Hosseini, signal the rich culture of political, intellectual and religious debate within Iran, particularly during the formal reform period. Overall, the new wave of religious thinking facilitated the work of Islamic feminists in the press, and also those working directly inside Parliament to change laws. As I show in the next chapter, the scholarly and intellectual debates about Islam and gender began to infiltrate everyday life, particularly among Iranians who were witnessing and practicing more gender justice and egalitarian modes of living and thinking. Additionally, as more Iranians gained access to the Internet, which is used as a source of both intellectual/political edification and broadcast, Islamic feminist ideas became amplified in new ways and in new, transnational spaces.

Engaging the Transnational: New Publics, New Media, New Political Cultures

Islamic feminism in Iran, like in other locations, also engaged the transnational sphere through its discourses and strategies. In addition to utilizing the ideas of religious reformers inside Iran, Islamic feminists also drew on ideas and discourses from the emerging global women's movement. They incorporated notions of individual human rights into their claims for gender equality within Islam (Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Hoodfar 1999; Mahdi 2003; Moghadam 2002; Moghadam 2003; Paidar 2002; Tohidi 2002;). Moghadam writes that in Muslim countries like Iran, Algeria and Afghanistan, "women

activists are increasingly setting their sights on global civil society, the transnational public sphere, and institutions of global governance to accomplish their goals at home.” Women activists “look to the UN women’s rights agenda for legitimacy, and they appeal to transnational feminist networks for solidarity and support with campaigns” (Moghadam 2003, 2). Tohidi points to the “international dialogue” between Western feminists and Muslim women: “Women activists in Iran, including many religious activists ... have shown as much, if not more, curiosity about the discourses, struggles, and achievements of their non-Muslim and nonreligious sisters in the West and in the developing world” (Tohidi 2002, 9). As neither “a product of East or West,” Islamic feminism “transcends and eradicates old binaries” (Badran 2009, 245).

As I elaborate in the next chapter, Islamic feminists have pushed the post-revolutionary state to live up to its own description of itself as modern and just by honoring international conventions, and “proving” that Islam and human rights are compatible. With feminists from around the world, Muslim feminists from Iran attended international UN conferences for women, and participated in the vibrant exchanges that produced what Amrita Basu calls “global alliances based on collective political goals and a common agenda” (2000, 71). An editorial for the Winter 1997 edition of *Farzaneh* stated:

The establishment of a universal code of human rights stands out as a beacon of human achievement. ... Women’s rights have emerged during the past two decades as an integral part [of] human rights instruments, addressing the tragic abrogation of women’s rights at the global level. The Convention on the Eradication of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and ensuing world conferences and finally the Beijing Platform for Action all reflect the centrality of the concept of ‘women’s rights as human rights’ as a norm and standard for contemporary thought and behavior. (Editorial Director 1997)

Paidar notes that Iranian women pushed Khatami's government to develop "indicators and other planning and monitoring tools for measuring women's advancement in Iran against CEDAW" (2002, 248), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Under Khatami, the Sixth Parliament pushed for major changes. As reformist parliamentarian, Elaheh Koolae, notes:

The reformist parliament tried to change women's legal status by focusing on laws related to issues such as inheritance, divorce, child custody, and insurance. The reformist government ratified and the parliament approved the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, the Guardian Council rejected CEDAW, interpreting it as in contradiction with Islamic values. (Koolae 2009, 58)

Despite such resistance, Islamic feminists inside and outside of parliament pushed the state to honor its own commitment to human rights. In so doing, Islamic feminism in Iran has produced new discourses and movements which rupture putative oppositions between religion and secularism, duties and rights, East and West, oppressive and liberatory, backwards and modern.

The rise of media technologies like the Internet has also contributed to the proliferation of new discourses like Islamic feminism through the creation of new sites for such discourses and newly engaged interpreting publics. As Alidou argues in the case of Kenya, "new ICT-based [information and communication technology] networking and the knowledge arising from it have created a space for an alternative women's understanding of Islam and Islamic discourses regarding gender identity" (2011, 181). This is true in many Muslim contexts, including Iran. Scholars have examined the rapid proliferation of the Iranian blogosphere (Alavi 2005; Bunt 2009; Shiksari 2010). As Bunt (2009) shows, while the internet is heavily censored by the hardliners in Iran, many of those hardliners, including Ahmedinejad, have blogs themselves. Iranians are among the

most represented participants in the blogosphere. As Alavi notes, “Farsi is the fourth most frequently used language for keeping on-line journals” (2005, 1). Semati asserts that “Iran was among the first countries to go online in the Middle East, and internet in Iran has become a major force socially, politically, and culturally. Presently, there are 700,000 registered blogs in Persian, which is among the top ten languages for blogging worldwide” (2009, 78). Khiabany and Sreberny argue that the Iranian blogosphere is “a vital site of political discourse that does extend the definition of the political into personal, gendered, and social realms” (2007, 564). As Godazagar (2009) notes, many Iranians view the internet as a new means of information and as an antidote to isolation. Kian-Thiebaut asserts that “[a]ccording to official statistics, the number of internet users had increased from 250 in 1994 to 4 million in 2006” (2009, 55). Amir-Ebrahimi states, “Iran is the fastest-growing site of Internet users in the Middle East, with a growth of 7,100 percent between 2000 and 2007” (2008, 235). Clerics, students, artists, women, indeed those from a variety of social locations and political persuasions, have accessed the Internet as readers and content creators.

Eickelman and Anderson argue that mass education and literacy, and the expansion of new media in the Muslim world have created new people, new thinking and new religious publics. This has a profound democratizing component, as the “asymmetries of the earlier mass media revolution are being reversed by new media in new hands” (2003, 2), and “a proliferation of media and means of communication have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities and networks” (2003, 3). As I claim in chapters 2 and 3, the One Million Signatures Campaign reflects the use of new media in amplifying feminist ideas and facilitating new transnational networks, and shows the

ways in which “Islamic feminism is circulating with increasing frequency in cyberspace” (Badran 2009, 245).

In the next few chapters, I show how the feminist discourse of gender equality within Islam that was once the purview of religious and literary experts has been taken up by everyday citizens. This, I assert, is in large part because of the top-down structure of Islamization enacted by the revolutionary and post-revolutionary state. In forcing a particular interpretation and legal structure of Islam on Iranians that, to those very citizens, betrayed their understanding of the equality and freedom principle in Islam, the state created its own opposition. Additionally, women and other citizens of Iran were also living the new social realities facilitated by the state: increased education and literacy, declining fertility rates, and new public services that increased the quality of their lives. For women, this contradiction—between the social and cultural realities of their relatively high-quality lives, own beliefs and practices of gender equality among their families, friends and communities, and their secondary legal status—created a new tension that gave rise to Islamic feminism.

While initially the articulation of Islamic feminist discourse was located mostly among elite women—that is, writers, scholars, lawyers and MPs—eventually these discourses, like other reform discourses, get taken up by everyday citizens. Given the rich culture of religious debate in Iran that expanded beyond elites to many other sectors during the reform movement, new media technologies like the Internet, facilitated this democratization process in Iran, opening up new space for new interpreting publics and lay exegetes like Islamic feminists. The One Million Signatures Campaign is one example of this phenomenon.

Eickelman and Anderson (2003) argue that new media technologies in Muslim world have helped distribute discussions and debates about the role and meaning of Islam to wider audiences.

As in earlier public spheres, challenges to authority revolve around rights to interpret. Consequently, Muslim politics is less an expression of a unitary voice (although many would claim this as the goal) than an engagement to argue over correct interpretations. What is new today is that these engagements spill out of a few specialized channels into many generalized ones. They do not necessarily become more public than in the past—mosque-universities were public places and legal writings were public documents, although few had access to them; they instead become public in different ways. Their characteristic feature is more, and new interpreters and, from them, the engagement of a more diverse and wider public. (Eickelman and Anderson 2003, 6)

This is an apt understanding of the ways that Islamic feminist frameworks have become assimilated into the everyday discourses of citizens and activists who find themselves with “not only more widely spread skills, but also wider, competing repertoires of intellectual techniques and authorities” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003, 11). And it is precisely this enabling set of conditions that both propel the Iranian feminist movement into a new stage, which I explore in the next chapters, and help it find resonance among ordinary Iranians.

What I am calling an assimilation of more elite discourses of Islamic feminism into the discourses of new political actors, Eickelman and Anderson term the “reintellectualization of Islamic discourse,” or the presentation of “Islamic doctrine and discourse in accessible, vernacular terms, even if this contributes to basic reconfigurations of doctrine and practice” (2003, 12). They argue that this is, in part, made possible by the interpretive tradition of Islam, but more about “the current experiences of believers” (2003, 13). These believers are the new religious public, who

continue the reintellectualization of Islamic discourse and weakening of formal religious authority.

The conjuncture of new media, new people, and the reintellectualization of Islamic discourse has broad implications. The first is that the translation or movement of messages from one medium to another changes the balance of what gets into circulation and who introduces new ideas. The proliferation of actors able to assert a public role leads to a fragmentation of authority, and it increases the numbers of persons involved in creating and sustaining a religious-civil public sphere. Even sloganeering—whether through graffiti, anonymous photocopied leaflets, or pamphlets—qualitatively changes the sum of Islamic discourse, even more so as many such documents are anonymous. The transposition of religious (and political) issues to new media also changes the associative ecology of Islamic discourse, juxtaposing religious issues in innovative ways with commerce, entertainment, and the professions, and contributing to the greater pervasiveness of religious themes in an increasingly redefined public life. (Eickelman and Anderson 2003, 14)

As my next three chapters show, Islamic feminists and their secular allies in and around the One Million Signatures Campaign are a huge part of this new public, continually and innovatively reintellectualizing Islamic discourse.

Conclusion

The century long and ongoing project of modern statehood has, in different ways, mobilized a discourse of gender and women's rights. This has facilitated the participation of women both as key nation-builders and critics of the state. The nationalist projects of modern Iran, whether secularizing or Islamizing, have used discourses of gender, rights and equality to consolidate their power and legitimacy. But religiosity and secularity have had less bearing on the formation of statehood than have the patriarchal policies and legal codes that have prohibited the state from fulfilling its ideologies (secular nationalist or Islamist) of women's emancipation and equality. My claim here is not that there are no ruptures in the different periods of nation-building in twentieth and twenty-first Iran, but

rather than powerful and often repressive statehood is not the domain of the Islamic Republic alone.

In fact, women's broad engagement with the state has been more possible under the Islamic Republic than it was under the secular eras that preceded it. This is largely due to the improvement in women's health, education and literacy in the last 30 years, and their political mobilization under the reform era. While I don't claim that Islam is more compatible with political democracy and engagement than secularism—an equally erroneous claim as the one which posits secularism as inherently democratic—I have shown here that Islamic discourses and Islamization processes in Iran have provided a remarkable flexibility in accommodating feminist ideas and feminists themselves.

Islamic feminists in Iran in the last two decades have creatively exploited the major paradox of the Iranian post-revolutionary state by bringing the state's own discourses about women's equality in Islam to bear on Islamic feminist reform strategies. Working with clerical and lay reformers who came up through the revolutionary and post-revolutionary era, Islamic feminists have mobilized their authority as "exegetes" and laid claim to their rights to interpret the Qur'an and other Islamic texts. They made some gains in making legal changes, but more significant has been their public presence and voice within Iran's rich culture of debate. Under the formal reform era of President Khatami, Islamic feminists used the print media to explore key ideas about women, gender, social justice and equality, thereby exposing ideas about Islamic feminism to ordinary citizens.

The consolidation of the more conservative forces in the Iranian state since the early 2004 has signaled the end of the formal period of reform. Print media has come

under attack, as have public political gatherings, and the Seventh and Eighth Parliaments have not been particularly aligned with a gender justice program.⁹ But as some spaces have shrunk, new spaces have opened up. The rise of new media technologies in the Muslim world has made it possible for new strategies and discourses from new publics to emerge when other public spaces (streets, offices, meeting places) have become inhospitable. As Bayat argues, when the Iranian state began to “crackdown on the print media, activists resorted to the Internet” (2007, 120).

As activists turned to the Internet, new communities and networks, linked transnationally around ideas, goals and methods, emerged. The One Million Signatures Campaign is one such example of a new political network facilitated, in part, by the Internet. The campaign draws on the rich culture of debate in Iran, which Islamic feminists and other reformers only deepened. Additionally, the campaign has found resonance among ordinary citizens in Iran, who have not only encountered these more broadly dispersed discourses, but are engaging in new social and cultural practices of gender equality and justice. The campaign is an on-the-ground campaign in that it depends on face-to-face contact between its activists and citizens. However, it utilizes the rise of new media in the Muslim world to further reintellectualize Islamic discourses, and deepen the democratization processes happening inside Iran. Building on the praxis of Islamic feminism, the campaign has generated what Marcotte calls new “political horizons” (2010, 155). In part, these new horizons are characterized by the legitimization of Iranian feminism as an indigenous, i.e., locally-emanating phenomenon.

⁹ However, as I discuss in Chapter 2, regressive family bills have been rejected by the Seventh and Eighth Parliaments due to pressure from women’s rights activists, including those in the One Million Signatures Campaign.

As a form of local feminism, the campaign, like other iterations of Iranian feminism in the last decades, draws on transnational networks and ideas to make its claims for gender equality. In this sense, the campaign builds on and deepens the praxis of Islamic feminism, thereby breaking down rigid distinctions between East and West, religion and secularism, and other binaries that work to consolidate Western hegemony over Iran. It brings ideas and discourse about women's rights together with Islamic discourses about gender equality and social justice. Through its on-the-ground method and presence on the Internet, the campaign engages the state, even in this politically conservative time, and challenges it to live up to its promises to be a just and rights-securing modern state. It is these phenomena that I explore in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Discourses of Equality, Rights and Islam in the One Million Signatures Campaign

In what way can social movements alter the states and political elites into society's sensibilities?

—Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*

As I argue in the last chapter, a society-wide discussion among those arguing for women's rights had been percolating from many corners of the country for many decades, certainly long before the 2009 presidential elections in Iran and the Green Movement for democracy that emerged in the aftermath. From the 1979 revolution to the current moment, conservative Islamists, reform clerics, secular and Islamic feminists and ordinary Iranian citizens have articulated a women's rights discourse from various political positions. Rights talk in Iran is certainly not new. Indeed, this poly-vocal discussion is not about whether or not women do or should have rights in Iran, but about the discursive and material ways in which those rights become manifest and meaningful. In this chapter, I concern myself primarily with the discourses and practices that one group of women's rights activists in Iran are using to gain gender equality in Iranian family law. Through a discursive analysis of the One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws Campaign (hereafter referred to as the One Million Signatures Campaign or the campaign), a campaign to achieve women's legal rights started in 2006, I will show how activists are framing women's rights within an "Islamic Human Rights" framework. Moreover, I highlight how the campaign argues that

women's equal rights within the law would bring women's legal status in line with women's relatively high status within modern Iranian culture. I assert that with these two discursive strategies, embedded in a bottom-up, consensus-building and (re)conciliatory campaign method, the campaign activists emphasize the indigenous or local character of their struggle and push the state to live up to its promise of being a rights-securing, just and modern Islamic state.

I also ask to what extent the campaign has or has not been successful in achieving its goals, and reflect on the implications of its successes and failures. Ultimately, I argue that the relative successes and failures of the campaign wane in comparison to the import of the particular praxis developed by Iranian feminists in the campaign. I foreground the ways in which the nexus of factors discussed in Chapter 1— the paradoxes of the post-revolutionary Iranian state, reform activists' engagements with the New Religious Thinking, and the proliferation of new media technologies which help reintellectualize Islamic discourses—have made it possible for women's rights activists in Iran and the diaspora¹ to engage in a “pragmatic” feminist politics.²

The campaign represents a new stage of the Iranian women's movement, while its discourses, strategies and methods reflect some of the political possibilities and restraints of the thirty-year post-revolutionary period. For three decades, religious and secular women have been challenging discrimination by the state, but as feminist activist Mahsa Shekarloo writes, “political and religious differences and regime pressures have prevented the establishment of a disciplined and organized front” (2005). As I outline in

¹ Chapter 3 analyzes the transnational network of the campaign through in-depth qualitative interviews with Iranian activists in California.

² I integrate some of these interviews into this chapter, in the section on the pragmatism of the campaign.

Chapter 1, the paradox of the Islamization project of the state continues to haunt contemporary politics, as women's rights activists, mobilized and feeling the effects of the hardliners' control of the Parliament in 2004, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency in 2005 and increasing crackdowns on political dissent by the state, determinedly brought the discourses of Islamic reform and human rights to a new, unprecedented campaign. On 12 June 2005, over 2000 women staged a sit-in in front of the University of Tehran, circulating a written declaration to revise the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Organized by women's groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and attended by religious and secular activists and Iran's most famous living female poet, Simin Behbahani, the sit-in and its declaration also received widespread endorsement from women and men including Nobel Prize winners feminist and human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi and South African archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Islamic Students' Association, environmental and educational NGOs, and webloggers. Although police cordoned the women off, preventing male supporters from joining them, the protest was relatively peaceful due to a general relaxation of security right before the 2005 presidential elections (Shekarloo 2005).

One year later, on the same date, women's rights activists staged another rally to commemorate the 2005 event, this time in front of one of Tehran's busiest squares, Haft-e Tir Square. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini reports, activists raised specific reforms in Islamic law: "a ban on polygamy, equal rights to divorce for women and men, joint custody of children after divorce, equal rights in marriage, an increase in the minimum legal age of marriage for girls to 18, and equal rights for women as witnesses" (2006b). A year into Ahmadinejad's presidency, security had tightened, and before it even began, the rally was

broken up by police, and some protesters were chased off, beaten and arrested (Mir-Hosseini 2006b).

The revolutionary and reform periods witnessed tremendous political participation by women. With important gains behind them, but many struggles still ahead, women's rights activists refused to abandon their efforts for reform in the face of increasing conservatism in the government. With crackdowns by the hardliners on the rise, feminists turned to a new strategy.

Campaigning for Equality

Two months after the rally was broken up, in August 2006, women's rights activists launched the campaign as a "follow-up effort to the peaceful protest of the same aim" (Change for Equality 2006b). Having been key actors in both the revolution and the vibrant civil society that emerged in response to the revolution's failures, women's rights activists who launched the campaign capitalized on the last three decades of struggle that politicized them and brought them into the public sphere in unprecedented numbers. It is important to note that the women who launched the campaign were primarily secular-identified feminists, although campaign members include a variety of social and political identifications—secular, Muslim, Muslim secular and Islamic feminist. Islamist women in favor of reforms were not key players in the campaign and this created some tensions among feminists in Iran. But the campaign retains a pragmatic approach of reforming, not eliminating, Islamic law, a tactic used by Islamist reform women, who fall under the broad swath of Islamic feminism.

The goals of the campaign are to collect one million signatures through door-to-

door contact, meetings and the Internet “in support of changes to discriminatory laws against women,” and to promote dialogue and discussion among women and men in meetings and public seminars and conferences (Change for Equality 2006b). The signatures collection is seen as the first phase of the campaign; in the second phase, campaign activists hope to work with supportive legal experts to draft new laws to replace unjust laws in the form of a legislative bill. The laws they seek to challenge are mostly family laws pertaining to custody, marriage, inheritance and divorce, among other issues (see Appendix A). As Cuno and Desai claim, family law “often is a selective codification of religious law, differing for citizens of different faiths” (2009, xiv). In Iran, like elsewhere in the Muslim world, “family laws continue to be contested by many actors” (Cuno and Desai, xiv).

In the Middle East and other Muslim contexts, feminists have turned to family law as a site of reform struggle. Moghadam and Gheytauchi assert:

Family laws are sometimes discrete bodies of legislation that cover marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance—such as the Personal Status Codes of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon. In other countries, such as Iran and Egypt, they are articles inscribed in the Civil Code. Based on conservative interpretations of the *Sharia*, or Islamic law, and on one or another of the Islamic schools of jurisprudence, Muslim family law places women in positions of subordination, and men in positions of authority within the family. Male kin have many more privileges than female kin. ... In the past two decades, reform of family laws has become the focus of feminist activism. (Moghadam and Gheytauchi 2010, 270)

Indeed, it’s important to emphasize that, as codified, Muslim family law derives from conservative interpretations of the *sharia*, as the above passage makes clear. As I showed in Chapter 1, however, many Muslim reformers and feminists, through exegetical strategies of Dynamic Jurisprudence, argue that in its essence, *sharia*, as the will of God revealed to the Prophet, has a social and gender justice message. They assert that it is the

ways it was interpreted, practiced, and codified—by its patriarchal interlocutors—that have produced a discriminatory legal structure. As a response, feminists in many different Muslim contexts are developing innovative strategies to challenge patriarchal interpretations of family law, pushing their societies’ legal structures to reflect the gender justice and equality messages within Islam.

In Morocco, for instance, women’s rights activists from different sectors of society struggled for over a decade to reform the *moudawanna*, the country’s patriarchal family law. In 2004, the “Moroccan parliament approved legislation to adopt a more gender-egalitarian family law,” and since then women’s activists, the government, and the judiciary have worked together to implement it (Moghadam and Geytanchi 2010, 267).³ The One Million Signatures Campaign in Iran, in fact, was “adapted from the Moroccan experience of the early 1990s” (Moghadam and Geytanchi 2010, 280).

The One Million Signatures Campaign has “chapters” throughout Iran and a “chapter” in Southern California. Yet, as I describe in the next chapter, calling these groupings of activists in different parts of Iran and Southern California “chapters” betrays the sense in which the campaign is a loose, informal transnational network of activists inside and outside Iran. As Chapter 3 shows, activists stress that the campaign is not an organization, but a network or movement, open to anyone who agrees with its basic tenets. The campaign network is rigorously horizontal and grassroots, rather than hierarchical and bureaucratic.⁴

The campaign has a dynamic website, called “Change for Equality,” where the petition, articles, news stories, interviews, photos and links to human rights groups are

³ See Zakia Salime (2011) for an in-depth analysis of this political movement.

⁴ See Chapter 3 for an elaboration and analysis of the structure of the campaign.

posted in Arabic, English, Farsi, French, German, Italian and Spanish. While the Internet presence has helped gather signatures and propelled the campaign into the transnational sphere, activists initially emphasized the door-to-door, face-to-face dialogue. However, in the aftermath of the 2009 elections and increasing crackdowns by the state, the Internet organizing of the campaign has taken on a new importance.

I have been tracking the campaign since its start, and have analyzed two and a half years' worth of website articles: approximately 200 pages of text, covering 2006 to 2009. Three major themes emerged in my analysis of the articles: the campaign (1) builds on Islamic feminist and reformist discourse to articulate women's equality within an Islamic human rights framework; (2) aims to reconcile Iranian law with Iranian culture; and (3) uses a bottom-up, consensus building, (re)conciliatory method, all of which work to foreground the campaign as a distinctly Iranian (as opposed to Western-influenced) project that deserves support from a modern Islamic state. The campaign also draws on the women's rights as human rights discourses that are circulating within women's NGOs and transnational feminist networks around the globe. This strategy, along with its multi-lingual Internet presence and its network of activists in California, positions the campaign as both local and transnational. As a local and transnational phenomenon, the campaign builds on Islamic feminist praxis and challenges Orientalist discourses which posit religious and secular discourses as counterpoised and antagonistic, and pit putative traditional and repressive states (Iran) against "democratic" and "liberatory" societies (the United States). By grounding ideas about human rights within Iranian Islamic feminist and reform discourses, the campaign challenges, but does not undermine the state by illustrating the compatibility and reciprocity of Islam, gender equality and human rights.

In this sense, the campaigners' political orientation is pragmatic: It makes particular "winnable" demands by working within the particular parameters established by the state.

Women's Human Rights Debates

Women's human rights discourses have been ubiquitous within feminist activism and scholarship, generating decades of debate. Some critics argue that as an offspring of development discourses, women's human rights regimes can consolidate the epistemic authority of the West (Grewal 1999), and strengthen imperialist aims (Basu 2000). Others argue that women's rights discourses often work to stabilize the category of "woman" through universalizing discourses; focus on "culture" as the perpetrator of human rights violations; reify North/South binaries; and cohere U.S. feminist subjectivity through rescue and savior narratives (Abu-Lughod 2002; Grewal 1999; Narayan 1997). Grewal writes that "global feminism constructs 'American' feminist subjects in the US in particular ways and enables them to become agents in the practice of 'rescuing' victims of human rights violations" (1999, 346). Similarly, Barlow argues that, through human rights regimes, "students do come to recognize ... a newly retooled ideology promising unmediated access to women from other countries" (2000, 1109).

Despite such problems and dangers, human rights frameworks have been one of the most effective tools for feminist activists. Decades of debates around human rights—along with new feminist movements, practices and discourses that have emerged from the global South—have led to richer conceptions of the human rights framework. As Ignatieff argues, "If there are human rights movements in developing countries, it is because non-derogable individual rights remain the single most powerful inspiration for

all battles against corrupt and tyrannous regimes” (2001, 15). In a more measured view, Cheah claims that “to be a concrete agent in history is, after all, to be contaminated in turn by historically existing ideals and norms, no matter how contaminated these ideas and norms are” (1997, 260), and that “human rights are double-edged but absolutely necessary weapons that are given to the disenfranchised by the global force-relations in which they find themselves mired in a given historical juncture” (1997, 263). A more positive assessment from Charlesworth (1994) points to the ways in which human rights are not only taken up by a multiplicity of political actors, but are shaped by them. Indeed, many women of color and anti-racist feminists in the U.S. (Roskos, 2004; Schulman, 2004; Smith, 2004) have used the tool of human rights to level powerful critiques against U.S. policies at home and abroad.

In Muslim contexts in the Middle East and North Africa, and also in the larger African continent, in Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the United States, Muslim women’s rights activists are claiming human rights discourses as their own, as part of larger reform discourses that recognize the compatibility of women’s rights with the tenets of Islam, and as part of transnational frameworks that signal modern statehood. In this sense, they are refashioning transnational feminist discourses of women’s rights, bringing their particular historical contexts to bear on globally circulating ideas and practices. Working against the bifurcation of culture and rights, in which Islam is framed as an excess of “culture,” impinging on universal and ahistorical “rights,” women’s rights activists in Muslim contexts are shaping “new human rights discourse” (Maoulidi 2011, 49), and “‘multi-culturalizing’ the human rights regime” within their particular contexts (Alidou 2011, 199).

As Osanloo argues, Iranian women are making rights claims in the post-revolutionary period through “dialogical sites,” including Qur’anic meetings, family courts, and state and local organizations (2009, 12-14). I extend Osanloo’s discussion of these sites to the realm of activist projects like the One Million Signatures Campaign, which are both local and transnational. The campaign, as I show below, has enriched the terrain of human rights discourses and practices by drawing on and making accessible key debates within Iranian society. It has deepened Islamic feminist praxis by further democratizing the discussion of Islam and drawing in new constituencies. As the campaign circulates and draws in new members and participants, Islamic discourses are further “reintellectualized” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003) and the doors of interpretation pushed open even wider.

Islamic Human Rights in the Campaign

In one of the first articles posted on its website, the campaign clearly stated that its goals were compatible with Islam and that Iran has an obligation to abide by international human rights treaties:

The demand to reform and change discriminatory laws is not in contradiction to Islamic principles and is in line with Iran’s international commitments. Iran is a signatory to the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights and as such, is required to eliminate all forms of discrimination. (Change for Equality 2006c)

This article goes on to embody a discursive strategy that asserts reform clerics like Ayatollah Sanei’i and Ayatollah Bojnourdi support “a revision and reform of laws which are discriminatory against women” (Change for Equality 2006c). Campaigners regularly draw on a less formal and more lay method of *ijtihad*—the interpretive practice used by trained Islamic scholars of engaging sacred texts in light of contemporary realities—as a

legitimate strategy, reflecting Iran's rich and positive culture of religious debate discussed in Chapter 1. Moreover, the campaign brings these debates, mostly in the domain of clerics, scholars and the press, to the grassroots through its outreach to ordinary Iranian citizens. Furthermore, by "reminding" the state of its international commitments to uphold civil and political rights in the context of a discussion of Islam's basic principles, the campaign pressures the state to fulfill its duties as a modern Islamic state. If equal rights for women are contained within Islam and if an Islamic state has already committed to international conventions against discrimination, women's equal rights in Iranian Islamic law must follow.

Building on a strategy from the Islamic feminist press that engaged with debates about Islam and women's rights, the campaign website has several interviews with reform clerics and religious scholars who support their goals. In this passage, Somaiyeh Farid interviews Taghi Rahmani, an independent journalist, human rights activist and religious activist. Rahmani looks back to the Prophet Muhammad's time, underscoring the ethical precepts inherent in Islam:

I believe the overall spirit of the Quran is important . . . In the Al-Omran sura in the Quran, God tells Mary's mother: 'I give you a child who is a child close to God'. The child turns out to be a girl and Mary's mother asks: 'How can a daughter ever be as good as a son?! But in God's view, there is equality. God says: 'Each according to the level of their dedication'. At that time, by giving women the right to testify, God gave them a position which stemmed from their gender, not their high esteem in society or family. Or in the case of inheritance, a woman who had no role in the process of production was given a right she did not have before. (Change for Equality 2007b)

Here Rahmani engages *ijtehad* to make a distinction between the patriarchal society that Islam inherited at the time of the Prophet, and the egalitarian vision contained in the Qur'an. He argues that the Qur'an gives women moral and ontological equality, but that

the patriarchal context in which it was revealed influenced its dominant interpretation. Reformers and feminists argue that from the Qur'an's ethical point of view, women have rights in Islam through the mere fact of their humanity and moral capacity. But this view did not prevail beyond the early Muslim society of Muhammad. Instead, by the Medieval period, patriarchal ideas about women as the inferior and subordinate gender became codified, and women acquired status through their association with men. While key figures in the revolution like Khomeini, who mobilized ideas about women's high status as religious beings and within the family, i.e. as differently gendered beings who acquire status in relation and service to others, and Shari'ati, who saw women as equal to men but different vis-à-vis their gender, Rahmani and the campaign challenge this discourse in favor of women's equality as full citizens and moral equivalents of men.

Highlighting how the first Muslim society at the time of Muhammad granted new rights to women, Rahmani stated, "The verses which pertain to the rights of women came down to the Prophet after women demanded those rights from him" (Change for Equality 2007b). Using the verses on inheritance as an example, Rahmani distinguishes between the egalitarian vision of the Qur'an and the ways in which it was interpreted and codified into law by the patriarchal societies that flourished at this time when men, threatening to "resign from our religion," questioned the Prophet's proclamation of egalitarian inheritance. He asks, "If the Prophet's tradition had continued, and the door of exertion (Ijtihad) had remained open, wouldn't some social laws have changed in favor of women in the first few centuries of Islam" (Change for Equality 2007b)? These types of contradictions are openings for women's rights activists and reformers to call on the Iranian state to rethink and revise its own patriarchal laws in favor of the Qur'an's ethical

and egalitarian precepts.

The campaign's Islamic Human Rights discourse has been integral to its bottom-up, consensus-building strategy, which I discuss below. By working within local frameworks and reaching out to a broad base, the campaign seeks to legitimize itself to both the state and Iranian citizens. As one campaigner says:

I'm the kind of feminist that lives and tries to work in the specific cultural and religious context of Iran . . . [T]he Campaign has been able to integrate the discourse of equality into people's religious discourse. Many people have written about the relationship of the two discourses in a positive manner and there have been lots of discussions. I think the Campaign is the first social action that has been able to articulate the issue of women's rights and Islam so broadly among people. (Change for Equality 2007c)

While this campaigner most likely overstates the campaign's role in the Iranian feminist movement as the first to frame women's rights within Islam, this passage points to the perceived effectiveness of such a strategy and the importance of respecting local contexts. Given the state's promises of women's equality within Islam, its critique of Western feminism as an undesired foreign import, and a majority Muslim citizenry, the campaign's Islamic human rights framework is a part of an effective and culturally resonant discourse.⁵

This culturally resonant discourse lines up with Osanloo's (2006) notion of Islamico-civil rights talk, which I argue is, in part, a product of the proliferation of what used to be more elite Islamic feminist discourses to more of the general population. I assert that these discourses have moved from the elite spaces of literary debates to the everyday understandings of ordinary women and men who have learned to negotiate within a complex and nuanced discourse that positions them as modern Muslim citizens.

⁵ Between 98 and 99 per cent of the Iranian population is Muslim (Association of Religion Data Archives n.d.). Of course, among Muslims, there are a range of religious and political identifications: secular Muslim, Islamist, Islamic feminist, etc.

This citizenry sees itself as having rights as the subjects of a modern nation whose judicial system is modeled partly after European courts (Osanloo 2006). At the same time, ordinary Iranians within and outside of the courts have become versed in specific and general tenets of Islamic law, and use their knowledge to argue for a more just version of Islam.⁶

In reframing Islam as compatible with women's equality, the campaign enlarges feminist conceptions of women's agency by moving religious discourses into the realm of "rights language." Moreover, notions of women's rights move from strictly secular-liberal frameworks into a more expansive lexicon, breaking down the borders between Western and non-Western, and secular and religious discourses. Most feminist notions of agency continually reinscribe the precepts of secular liberalism, eliding the actual capacities and practices of Muslim women. Some scholars have responded to such theoretical lacunae by arguing that agency must be considered within the particular historical, national, cultural and religious contexts defined by the subjects of one's analysis (Asad 1993; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2001; Mahmood 2005).

Mahmood (2001 and 2005) has been particularly helpful in rethinking women's agency within the Muslim world. Mahmood argues that we must read the practices of religious women within the appropriate "grammar of concepts" that give meaning to those acts. She builds on the work of Talal Asad who argues that "'agency' is a complex term whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself" (2003, 78).

Historical context shapes the specific ways in which agency becomes meaningful to

⁶ See also Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Kim Longino's superb documentary, "Divorce Iranian Style" (1998), and Ashgar Farhadi's acclaimed drama, "A Separation" (2011), for examples of this kind of exegetical and interpretive engagement from everyday citizens.

different historical actors.

I have found Asad's and Mahmood's genealogies of agency to be particularly useful in theorizing women's activism within Muslim contexts. Thinking through the discursive strategy of the campaign through the "grammar of concepts" that it mobilizes makes it possible to understand discourses of Islam and discourses of rights as both emerging from a culturally specific context. At the same time, I want to push and extend the notion of reading different acts of agency through the grammar of concepts that gives them meaning by troubling the idea that one grammar of concepts is historically and discursively distinguishable from another. In other words, the very multi-discursive nature of the campaign's Islamic human rights framework signals the ways in which historically specific discourses emerging from one context can intersect and entangle with other historically specific discourses emerging from another context, thereby transforming seeming distinct discourses into something altogether different.

"Rights talk"—notions of individuals as rights-bearing citizens with inalienable rights—is one example of a specific discourse that can be read within a secular-liberal logic. The grammar of concepts that gives it meaning assumes the autonomy of the individual, and individual subjectivity as, in part, a product of knowing oneself as rights-bearing. As Osanloo (2006) argues, Iranians have come to see themselves as rights-bearing in part because of the unique structure of the courts, modeled after European courts, but also because the hegemony of secular-liberal frameworks has meant that liberal rights discourses circulate in some fashion in most corners of the globe.

But Osanloo, Asad and Mahmood do not theorize the ways in which discourses circulate transnationally and then become "localized" through specific contexts and

practices, which then might travel outside of those contexts to shape and animate new transnational flows and exchanges. The Islamic human rights discourses within the campaign and within Iran more generally point to the ways in which it has become more difficult to distinguish strictly secular-liberal discourses from strictly non-secular-liberal discourses. Even Osanloo's framework assumes that two distinct discourses have come together to form something new. Instead, I argue that Islamic human rights discourses emerging from Islamic feminism in general, and the campaign in particular, do not so much weld together religious discourses of Islam and secular discourses of rights as they produce new discourses that emerge from multiple and sometimes indistinguishable grammars of concepts.

Hodgson's (2011) explication of the different iterations and circuits of rights discourse is helpful. As the editor of an anthology on the interplay between gender, culture and rights, Hodgson ends her introduction to the collection in the following way.

“[W]omen's human rights” is never a static category that an individual or collectivity either “has” or “does not have.” Rather, the very terms of the category—women, human, and rights—are always in question, subject to alternative and sometimes competing interpretations, “vernacularizations,” appropriations, and contestations. By tracing the “social life” (Abu-Lughod) of these concepts as they have circulated in different times and places, through specific media and institutions, the authors make visible how gender, culture, and power have shaped their images and interventions, their travels and translations, and their mobilizations and mediations. (Hodgson 2011, 14)

Indeed, as Hodgson asserts above, Abu-Lughod's notion of the “social life” of Muslim women's rights helps us move from asking if Muslim women have rights to tracing how the concept is “mediat[ed] through various social networks and technical instruments” (Abu-Lughod 2011, 101-102). As campaigners ground ideas about women's equality and women as individual rights-bearing citizens within an Iranian and Islamic feminist

framework, they locate the notion of rights as inherent in Islam and as a component of what a modern nation-state must provide its citizens. Articulating an Islamic human rights framework through its website articles and face-to-face conversations, the campaign produces a particular “social life” of Islamic human rights discourses that both reflect and point to what campaigners frame as the “inevitability” of women’s equality within Islam.

“Harmonizing” Law with Culture

A second discourse emanating from the campaign is the notion that Iranian culture—articulated in the campaign as economic and social conditions, as well as the everyday practices, ideas and ideals of the majority of Iranian people—enjoys women’s mass participation and reinforces their relatively high social status.⁷ As a result of Islamization, the opening of Free Universities in almost every corner of Iran and the post-revolutionary state’s commitment to girls’ education and literacy, women entered higher education institutions in unprecedented numbers, comprising “over 60% of those being admitted to university” (Change for Equality 2006a). In this case, the campaign uses a strategic discourse in framing the implementation of women’s legal rights as a necessary outcome of a culture which has normalized ideas about women’s equality. The campaign, then, seeks to bring culture to bear on law and challenge the Orientalist trope of Iranian culture as inherently backwards, patriarchal and anti-modern.

The campaign emphasizes support among different sectors of the Iranian population for women’s equality. As one campaigner says, “The younger men who are

⁷ I, too, use this understanding of culture, also acknowledging there are multiple cultures within any society. But here I’m exploring the ever-shifting practices and discourses about gender that permeate most corners of society.

joining the women's movement are different from the young men I knew several years back. They have internalized the discourse of equality more seriously" (Change for Equality 2007c). In a similar vein, another campaign supporter reflects:

I think that this effort is the most civil of efforts designed to bring about change in line with social demands . . . Traditional families, with strong religious beliefs, who understand the fact that they are living in a modern world, recognize that a modern existence requires new rules. This is because traditional social relations, for which these laws were established, no longer exist. The legal status of women, even those living in the most traditional of families, who are employed, have an income and are full partners in carrying and handing the economic burdens of the family, must be re-examined with a new perspective. (Change for Equality 2006e)

This discourse seeks to reconcile Iranian law with Iranian culture, or the already changed social relations in which all Iranians find themselves.

The above campaigner's discourse resonates with other Islamic reform discourses which distinguish between "changeable" and "unchangeable" precepts within Islam in an effort to reconcile contemporary law with contemporary social conditions. As Rahmani asserts: "Social laws are laws that describe the relationships of individuals to each other and to society and they also include politics, power, government, etc. Unlike prayers (namaz) and fasting (roozeh), these laws are not static" (Change for Equality 2007b). While some precepts in Islam are eternal, others are temporal, i.e. open to be adjusted to contemporary conditions. Iranian clerics and religious thinkers have long drawn on this distinction in their efforts to modify Islamic law.

For instance, Abdolkarim Soroush, the religious philosopher I examined in Chapter 1, who was close to Shari'ati, appointed by Khomeini to serve on the Council for Cultural Revolution (Mir-Hosseini 1999) and is now a leading religious reformer who has been forced into exile by the hardliners, argues that religion and religious knowledge are two different things. Religious knowledge, the human understanding one brings to

religion's eternal message, is temporally bound and therefore open to reform. Religious laws, therefore, are and should be susceptible to contemporary human understandings (Soroush 2000).

The campaign draws out this reformist understanding by arguing for laws to be culturally, i.e., temporally and socially, bound. “[Religious scholars] believe that considering the circumstances of time and place, laws must change to be in harmony with the level of culture and with the role and presence of Iranian women” (Change for Equality 2006d).

As a distinctly Islamic reformist and feminist discourse, the campaign's demand to harmonize law with culture draws on cultural conditions already in place to make legal rights for women meaningful. In other words, in its legal rights-seeking effort, the campaign stresses the importance of socially mandated laws to logically extend the changes in women's status already underway. By pointing to traditions within Islam that legitimize the revision of laws and underscoring the support of the majority of Iranian people for women's equality, the campaign pushes the state to reflect in law what it has, in part, produced: a literate, educated and socially powerful female citizenry whose equality is supported by a majority of Iranian people.

Door-to-Door, Face-to-Face: Dialogue and Consensus Building in the Campaign

The campaign uses bottom-up, consensus-building and reformist discourses – which range from appealing to people's sympathetic response to the campaign to shaming the state – and organizing methods. All work to frame the campaign as a non-controversial, majoritarian project. In addition to branches in multiple cities and network

members in California, and a strong Internet presence, the campaign had established multiple committees in each region that gave volunteers experience in grassroots organizing. Among the committees in Tehran are those dealing with the media, volunteers, education, finance, a mothers committee, public relations, publications and documentation. As new branches of the campaign are established, committees are set up as needed. Communications between branches happens through the volunteer committees and the website.

The face-to-face, dialogic aspect of the campaign is what the campaign prioritizes above all. This grassroots approach legitimizes the campaign through broad support. As one campaigner states:

Our plan was to launch the campaign at the Ra'ad Residential Complex in Shahrak-e Gharb in Tehran with a large number of supporters participating in the event. Unfortunately, a few hours before the start of the rally, the permit for holding this event was withdrawn. However, the supporters were not willing to leave. Therefore, the program took place in the street. Perhaps the fact that the campaign started in the street and announced its identity and goals right there in the street was a sign of its nature and identity: that it belongs to everyone. (Change for Equality 2007a)

However the campaign does have some elitist roots. Shahrak-e Gharb is an exclusive, upper-middle-class residential development in Tehran with a reputation for housing Western-identified residents. The choice to launch the campaign from here points to the secular and upper-middle-class roots of some of its founders. At the same time, the campaign seeks broad-base support from all sectors of Iranian society, and strives to work against elitism in its discourses and strategies. Articulating the campaign as the province of ordinary citizens and not an elite group of feminist activists works to reinforce the idea that women's equality in the law is a desire of the Iranian majority, and

challenge the state's frequent framing of the campaign as a "national security threat."⁸ This framing relies on a notion of women's rights as imposed from the outside (the West, or more specifically, the US), and tries to manipulate legitimate concerns about US interventions. But the campaign counters with a consistent anti-elitist, consensus-building discourse that seeks to disarm the state. Often that discourse asserts women's legal rights as so "tangible" or "elementary" that "no one can be seriously opposed to them" (Change for Equality 2007a).

The campaign regularly reports that signature-gathering volunteers have had "friendly and sympathetic encounter[s] with the women and men that they approached" (Change for Equality 2007a). In an early published article, the campaign interviewed Simin Behbahani, Iran's oldest living female poet, who urged campaigners to "be generous and kind. When they approach people, they should be patient and open. Women are mothers, sisters, wives, lovers, and friends, and they must continue the long struggle with solicitude and kindness" (Change for Equality 2006f). This strategy of non-opposition, sympathy and kindness works to situate women as valued members of larger family, kin and social networks, who are not only working on their own behalf, but for the good of all Iranians. As campaigners, they seek to build consensus and dialogue among a broad base of Iranians. Through family and social networks, women can reach broad layers with whom they can exchange ideas in familiar settings, occasionally even collecting signatures. As one campaigner notes:

⁸ The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran reports that, since August 2006, activists in the One Million Signatures Campaign have "faced harassment and obstruction of their peaceful efforts by security forces. They have been systematically denied space for convening meetings. Additionally, activists have been arrested while collecting signatures in support of the Campaign's petition . . .for convening meetings and for writing on the Campaign's website. As of 2008, 44 members of the Campaign have been arrested for alleged violations in relation to their peaceful activities in support of women's rights" (2008). In addition to harassment of campaigners, the website is frequently blocked by government authorities.

I gave my mother some Campaign booklets to distribute among the women in her religious gatherings. They were very positive and signed the Campaign petition. They are discussing women's issues and are supportive of such social actions. My mother recently went to another religious gathering and challenged the government's new family bill that is being reviewed in Parliament for passage. [The Family Protection Bill failed to be ratified by the full Parliament in September 2008].⁹ She is very involved and discusses the issues with her friends and social circle. Sometimes she manages to collect signatures. (Change for Equality 2007c)

Women's social and kin networks provide a "safe" place through which to build consensus about women's equality.

Drawing on a collective, almost familial discourse, sometimes the campaign shamed the state:

I hope that judiciary officials realize that after 30 years, the Islamic Republic is strong enough as to not have its national security threatened by the mere act of signature collections . . . This argument . . . is not valid and it is somewhat of an insult to the Islamic Republic. (Change for Equality 2008)

Clearly, this strategy was used at a time when Iranians could assume the state would engage in a reasonable amount of political debate. The campaign used discourses of non-opposition, kindness and conciliation to put an onus on the state to reconcile with the desires and practices of its modern, religious and rights-seeking citizenry. The surprise and outrage that greeted the violent punishment meted out to one campaigner worked to remind the state of its interests in harmonizing its laws with the desires of the majority of Iranians.

I believe that lashing sentences are a source of shame and constitute disparagement for all Iranians who believe in justice and equality . . . Again I want to stress that I am shocked and disappointed about the implementation of such a sentence and I can't believe that our officials insist on portraying themselves in such a harsh manner. The recent violent response to women's rights

⁹ Among other discriminatory provisions, the Family Protection Bill would have put a tax on *Mehr* (dowry paid to the wife), authorized polygamous marriages without the consent of the first wife, and made divorce for women even more difficult to obtain. A coalition of feminist activists, including the campaign, was instrumental in its defeat.

activists takes place at a time when all sectors of society, including the grassroots and lawmakers alike are engaged in a discussion on women's rights and the need to reexamine the laws which govern the lives of women. (Campaign for Equality 2009b)

This articulation of shock and disappointment assumed the state would want, as a “strong,” just and modern Islamic state, to reflect the desires of its people. Again, this assumption was easier to make before the extremely heightened repression following the 2009 presidential elections. By pressuring the state to respond to this peaceful, bottom-up initiative, the campaign strengthened its consensus-building discourse and further legitimized its demands as non-elitist, indigenous and broadly supported.

Signatures, Consciousness-Raising and Campaign Dilemmas

Five-plus years into the campaign, that millionth signature remains a long way off. Campaign members estimate that just over 100,000 signatures have been collected, which may be the result of a couple of factors. First, campaign members have suffered constant harassment and arrest. One can assume this has been a tremendous drain on the campaign, as energy and resources must be spent trying to support and free imprisoned women. Second, the election debacle has funneled most political activists into the Green Movement while shutting down spaces for previously tolerated efforts like the campaign. This reality presents new coalitional possibilities for activists, but has also forced activists, including those in the campaign, to reevaluate their goals.

Yet one must also ask how broadly and deeply the campaign has resonated with ordinary citizens and fellow feminist activists inside Iran, which is difficult to assess given that security issues prevented my field research with the campaign inside Iran. I have relied primarily on data emanating from the campaign itself, a clearly partial view

and one that articulates the campaign as highly effective. Scant information exists about the campaign from activists working inside Iran beyond the campaign articles themselves. A search on “women’s activism in Iran” in the widely read Middle East Report ([http:// www.merip.org](http://www.merip.org)) revealed a number of articles on women’s issues in Iran, but nothing on the campaign specifically. The same search in Academic Search Premier also revealed nothing on the campaign. Part of the reason for the dearth of critical reflection on the campaign is that it is still relatively new. Scholars are only beginning to research and reflect on the campaign. But the absence of analysis may also point to its possible marginality within Iran. Conversations with family members in Isfahan, Shiraz, Kerman and Tehran on a non-research visit to Iran in December 2008/January 2009 revealed to me that among my extended family – somewhat representative of politically aware, but not politically active middle-class Iranians – very few knew about the campaign.

It is not clear to those outside Iran, myself included, what kinds of political divisions among feminist groups in Iran, if any, might be working against the campaign’s effectiveness. Shekarloo (2005) and Mir-Hosseini (2006) caution that the women’s rights activists who organized protests in June 2005 and 2006 were secular-identified and may have alienated some key Islamic feminists who were part of the reform movement. It is these secular-oriented women’s rights activists who went on to launch the campaign. Indeed one California member I interviewed intimated that the campaign failed to pull in these key Islamic feminists from the beginning, which caused some initial tensions and divisions in the campaign. On the other hand, feminist scholar and activist, Janet Afary argues that campaign activists “have moved beyond the sectarian and ideological divides

that hampered the women's movement for much of the twentieth century" (2009, 372–3). Most likely both things are true: that the campaign has alienated some women activists inside Iran and that it tries to work against sectarianism and divisiveness by having a horizontal structure and using discourses that resonate with ordinary Iranians.

Nonetheless, the campaign has received more international attention from Western feminist groups than most other feminist groups inside Iran, perhaps disproportionate to the campaign's actual effectiveness within Iran. The campaign has received several awards from groups like the Feminist Majority Foundation, in part because the campaign draws on liberal Western feminist discourses of equality, its US presence vis-à-vis its California activists and its effective use of the Internet. And while the campaign has refused award money from Western groups and worked hard to articulate itself as non-elite and horizontally organized, it may be that this Western attention and recognition has exacerbated any tensions or divisions among feminist groups within Iran.¹⁰

The Pragmatic Politics of the Campaign

The praxis of the campaign network is what one interviewee calls a "pragmatic" feminism. This pragmatism is signaled by a reconciliatory approach to the state, a reformist discourse around Islam, and a democratic, anti-ideological practice. As this activist states:

To make [Islam] compatible with contemporary, worldly, universal values, it's a radical move from a very ideological Islamist system. So that's why it's hard to really define the campaign in a conventional, you know, division of schools of feminist discourses, political discourses that we are usually exposed to. That's why maybe what is more applicable here is that it's a pragmatic approach, and it's

¹⁰ In Chapter 3, I discuss the dilemmas of Western support of the campaign in detail.

a demand oriented movement, which is a kind of translation of *motalebe-mehvar*. *Motalebe* means demand, *mehvar*, centered. It's around certain demands, which makes it more inclusive, because whoever wants these demands, shares these demands, then are part of this campaign. Make it more inclusive, but also more, therefore more flexible. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

As I explore further in Chapter 3, this pragmatist approach has been criticized by parts of the Iranian diaspora whose secularism takes the form of rigid anti-Islam politics.

But as my interviewee argues, the pragmatism of the campaign reflects “the predominant trend now” in Iran. She claims that “society has moved beyond sectarianism, beyond Islamism,” and that the Green movement reflects a “post-Islamist” trend in politics (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009). This aligns with what Bayat (2007) calls the “post-Islamist turn” in social movements in the Muslim world.

Looking at Iran and Egypt, Bayat argues:

Post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic nor secular. Rather it represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past. It strives to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom, with democracy and modernity (something post-Islamists stress), to achieve what some scholars have termed an “alternative modernity.” Post-Islamism is expressed in acknowledging secular exigencies, in freedom from rigidity, in breaking down the monopoly of religious truth. In short, whereas Islamism is defined by the fusion of religion and responsibility, post-Islamism emphasizes religiosity and rights. (Bayat 2007, 11)

This post-Islamist trend is precisely what defines the campaign's discourses, methods and practices, and explains, in part, the resonance of the campaign in Iran. As this activist continues:

It doesn't mean that people have left their religion behind. No, some have done, actually [*sic*]. Some younger people are just so fed up with even Islam altogether, and with religion. But many people are still religious. But there has been now this official Islam and people's Islam, or ordinary Islam. And people, therefore, are more receptive to the idea that yeah, I can be a Muslim, but ... I don't have to like, for example, cover myself in order to be Muslim. Cover my hair. I can wear

makeup and still be a Muslim. I can dance and still be a Muslim. They want to make life easier for themselves, rather than following all these strict rules and prohibitions that the government imposes on them. So society in general has become very pragmatic. They want feasible solutions and they're not revolutionary. They are not after utopia anymore. They want to make life easier. So it is not like 1979. Our generation were [*sic*] very idealistic. We were of course either Marxists. Some Maoists, some Islamists, some Shari'ati, some Khomeini. But these people, as you can see, even there is no single charismatic leader for the movement that people say, I'm ready to die for you, like the way that they were ready to die for Khomeini. Which is good, it's promising and extremely hopeful. So I think that the campaign and the women's movement in general, is actually a very good example of the exemplary component of the general trend that is out there. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

As I discuss in the Conclusion to this dissertation, the recent social movements in the Middle East and North Africa reflect the post-Islamist turn. The campaign is no exception to this trend, and in fact, it could be argued that it has been a "pioneer" in implementing such an approach to politics.

Conclusion

Despite the high number of signatures that remain to be gathered, uncertainty over the degree of efficacy and questions among the campaign activists themselves about their post-election direction, the campaign has contributed to what Reed and Foran (2002) have called "political cultures of opposition." These cultures of "individuals, groups, and organizations" articulate "plurivocal and potentially radical ways of understanding" (Reed and Foran 2002, 338–9) the period they are living through. Indeed, using human rights within an Islamic framework and women's equality discourses, the One Million Signatures Campaign and its network of supporters have been successful at building on the shifting social practices, beliefs and desires of millions of Iranian women and men who have internalized a radically different version of Islam than that codified by the

hardliners. The June 2009 presidential campaigns reflected the inevitability of the state having to actualize women's legal rights. A loose network of secular and Islamic feminist activists, including those in the signatures campaign, called the Women's Convergence pushed for reforms in the law before the elections and engaged both reform candidates, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, around women's issues. As the signatures campaign website reports, Karroubi "promised to submit bills to parliament intent on reforming laws which discriminate against women" (Farhang 2009). Following Karroubi's promise, Mousavi "issued a comprehensive programme on women as part of his election platform, in which he also committed to reforming discriminatory laws against women" (Farhang 2009). Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, also emblemized a modern, Islamic couple by holding hands in public and using every opportunity to put forward Rahnavard to speak about women's legal rights and equality.

Rahnavard, like many Islamic feminists in Iran both inside and outside of the campaign, has a long and compelling history of political activism. As Janet Afary (2009) writes, the young Rahnavard was influenced by Marxism and participated in the broad anti-Shah left. Ultimately, Rahnavard wanted to integrate her religious beliefs into her politics. She became a follower of Shari'ati, then Khomeini, and was part of the Islamist intellectual and political forces that supported the revolution. Highly educated – she has a Master's degree in art and a doctorate in politics – Rahnavard has "lived a life that seemed to offer many new choices," more than those available to previous generations (Afary 2009, 256). Afary goes on:

By becoming a political activist in the Islamist movement, she [Rahnavard] found a compromise solution. She returned to many of her familial ethical principles without abandoning her desire for new ones, such as an advanced education, professional and economic progress for women, and companionate marriage,

albeit within the bounds of Islam. (Afary 2009, 256)

I would modify Afary to argue that it is precisely Islam, and the particular Iranian Islam of the modern revolutionary state, that made Rahnavard's and so many Islamic feminists' reconciliations of Islam and feminism possible. In other words, instead of a boundary, Islam is the very condition of Rahnavard's and many other Muslim women's feminist agency. Like the campaign, Rahnavard represents a pragmatist approach to feminist engagement in Iran.

The face-to-face, consensus-building discourses and strategies work alongside and encompass other campaign discourses of Islamic human rights and reconciling law to culture. Together they worked to mobilize broad support for the campaign and highlight the locally-driven and locally-desired goals of the campaign by building on Islamic feminist and reform discourses internal to Iran, foregrounding the mass support of the "presence of Iranian women" within Iranian culture and demanding the reconciliation of law to this culture, and bringing bottom-up, conciliatory methods and discourses to bear on the state's formation of itself as a modern, Islamic, rights-securing entity.

The failure of the Family Protection Bill to be ratified in the full Parliament signals the effectiveness of the coalition of feminists, including those in the campaign, in mobilizing opposition to further discriminatory laws, despite the increased harassment, repression and imprisonment of activists. A similar Family Protection Bill was again submitted to Parliament in 2010, and in the more repressive political atmosphere, had a better chance of being voted into law. However, it too faced massive opposition, including quite public opposition from Zahra Rahnavard, and has been tabled once again. As the last three decades attest, women will continue their efforts to command an equal

place within Iranian society and, hopefully, within eventually reformed laws. The paradox that haunts the revolutionary state is that it facilitated the vast participation of women in public life, producing an emboldened citizenry that continues to hold it to its potential and its promises.

The women's movement in Iran, arguably the most dynamic in the region, has succeeded in putting women's legal equality on the national agenda. Moreover, millions of women all over the country, young and old alike, have become powerful agents of major changes in everyday life in Iran. Their presence and involvement in the public sphere and their desires for equality in all spheres of life have grounded and legitimated feminist activists' struggles for legal reform. These realities explain women's mass participation in the election campaigns and protests that followed. Although it is unclear what will happen in the coming period, women's activism will persist in creative forms. Iran is, as Homa Hoodfar asserts, democratizing "from the inside out" (2009, 60). Women's activism, facilitated by the revolution, the paradoxes of Islamization and a dynamic civil society and women's movement, will continue to be central to that project. While legal rights in Iran are often discriminatory to women, everyday practices and desires have shifted tremendously, reflecting the trend towards more egalitarian and democratic families and relationships. As the post-election Green Movement grows and changes, and Iranians advocate for greater democracy despite state repression and increased violence, women, including those activists from the campaign, will continue to be key actors.

Reflecting on the strength of the campaign, Shirin Ebadi states, "[the Iranian feminist] movement is the strongest movement in Iran, as well as in the Middle East.

There is no other movement as broad as the Iranian women's movement, with as much impact in the region" (Change for Equality 2009a). Indeed, the campaign has not only impacted the region, but, as I argue in the next chapter, extended to the transnational sphere. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Iranian feminists, including the Muslim and secular feminists that are part of the campaign, have drawn on transnational networks enabled by the rise of global women's movements and new opportunities for networking through cyberspace. In the next chapter, I explore the transnational network of the campaign and the ways in which the particular discourses, strategies and practices of Iranian feminist activists in the campaign and its diasporic network have fundamentally reanimated the possibilities for transnational feminist praxis.

Chapter 3

From Tehran to Los Angeles and Back Again: The Transnational Politics of the One Million Signatures Campaign

We believe that we must work collaboratively in order to formulate transnational feminist alliances.

—Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity”

Now, the internet speaks before everything else. And so it is very important, and that’s why we help the members of the campaign in Iran to translate articles and to communicate with them through the website.

—Interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009

The One Million Signatures Campaign has had a transnational reach from the beginning. While initiated by activists in Iran, the campaign’s loose network structure makes it possible for Iranian activists outside of Iran to participate by distributing information about the campaign, gathering signatures, and publicizing the campaign. High-profile figures like Shirin Ebadi have attracted transnational attention to and recognition of the campaign, but ordinary activists on the ground have worked very hard to amplify it. In October 2009, I traveled to Los Angeles to interview a cluster of activists working together on the campaign. It is difficult to describe them as a chapter of the campaign because, as they all emphasized, the campaign is not an organization. Instead, these activists, like their Iranian counterparts, see the campaign as a horizontal, flexible and highly democratic network, open to anyone who agrees with its goals. The California activists have no office. They are not a registered nonprofit, nor do they have any kind of

institutional backing or support. Like many new movements today,¹ they have no identified leaders, and try to make decisions based on in-depth discussions towards consensus.

I did in-depth qualitative interviews with eight of the women who are among the estimated 12-15 of those most active with the Southern California network.² They all live in and around the greater Los Angeles area, and range from the ages of 22 to the mid-fifties. Seven out of eight are first-generation Iranians, and 7 out of 8 of them had been in the U.S. for fewer than ten years at the time of my interviews. They range in class and social location, from students to cultural workers to professionals. All of the interviews took place in English.³

This chapter explores the transnational politics of the campaign through the networks created among the Southern California activists and those in Iran. I consider what it means for Iranian activists living outside of Iran to participate in the campaign, particularly as they negotiate several distinct phenomena: their location in the U.S. vis-à-vis their counterparts in Iran; attention from Western feminists; and the elision of Iranian women's agency, both by some segments of the Iranian diaspora and by Western (mis)understandings of women in Iran. I argue that the democratic structure of the campaign, and the non-ideological and pragmatic practice of its participants have created new transnational political cultures that are both effective, i.e., have achieved concrete successes, and affective, i.e., have produced new spaces of hope and possibility that

¹ In my concluding chapter, I explore the similarities of this campaign to other contemporary movements like the Arab uprisings and Occupy Wall Street.

² All of the activists I interviewed gave this same estimation.

³ For security reasons, all interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. For the same reason, I have kept descriptions of the activists to a minimum.

radically destabilize hegemonic framings of Iran, Iranian women and Islam. I situate the transnational network of the campaign in the context of the perils and promises of transnational feminist organizing, exploring the dilemmas and opportunities that arise when such work is undertaken in the context of neoliberal transnational governmentality. Fundamentally, I ask if the discourses and practices of the campaign might revitalize the foundational moments of transnational feminism, whose epistemic, political and affective praxis of decolonization, justice, solidarity, and cross-border collaboration marked a distinct turn in feminist theory.

The Horizontal Network of the Campaign

One of the key themes among all of the interviewees was the emphasis on the horizontal structure of the campaign. Each activist I interviewed emphasized the inclusivity of the campaign, and the fact that anyone who agreed with its goals could join. As I've shown in the last chapter, this horizontal, democratic, and inclusive practice comes through very clearly in the discourses of the campaign, publicized on the website. The heavy emphasis on this practice by California activists I interviewed shows that the discourses of the campaign derive largely from its practice. Many stressed that the campaign is not an organization, but functions more like a network or a movement. As one activist said, "[I]t's something you can start anywhere, anytime. So it's not like an organization you can found" (interview with a campaigner, October 23, 2009). This sense of no single ownership, but a loose collectivity of individuals, each empowered to be part of and amplify the campaign, is part of what many activists attribute to its success. As another activist claims:

So I see it as a much broader movement, but for me, like what it has brought, has really brought to me, is I've also been involved in a lot of things, but for me activism in a sense, made me really cynical about organized movements, and it has made me really cynical about why people get involved in activism to begin with. But the campaign has been one of those "success" stories, and that has been heartwarming, so that's meant a lot to me. Maybe the campaign and Amnesty [International] have been the two things that have made me feel good. But organized anything have [*sic*] made me really cynical in the recent years especially. (interview with a campaigner, October 23, 2009)

Other activists expressed this cynicism about organized, i.e., more centralized kinds of groups because for the last several decades, pre- and post-revolutionary regimes were highly ideological, shutting out, imprisoning and executing anti-Shah activists, then after the revolution, many supporters of the revolution who came to disagree with and challenge Khomeini's consolidation of power and authority.

The anti-ideological emphasis of the campaign can be understood in two ways. As I show in Chapter 1, the main theorists of the revolution, Shari'ati and Khomeini, addressed women's rights and equality only at the level of ideology. In other words, their discourses addressed gender equality within Islam largely at the level of abstraction, avoiding specific promises around political or legal changes. Abrahamian argues that Sharia'ti "spoke in allegories, used words with double meanings, and often avoided direct reference to immediate issues" (1982, 466). Similarly, Khomeini mobilized women's participation in the revolution by arguing that the ideology of Islam offered an alternative to women's exploitation under capitalist relations. Additionally, during and after the revolution, women came to bear the burdens of shoring up and "protecting" revolutionary ideals. Their prescribed gender roles, which included imposed forms of dress, exclusion from certain professions, and limits to participation in public life, were rationalized under an ideology of separate but equal.

Secondly, like many left and progressive movements, Iran's left has seen no shortage of sectarian battles, splits, and intra-group divisions. As Mahdi (2003) argues, the decades following the revolution signaled a new non-ideological stage in Iranian politics, as activists, particularly women, sought to make social changes without subsuming individual identities or interests. Mahdi asserts that post-revolutionary women's activism in Iran is "suspicious of 'vanguardism' and 'practical rigidity' of leftist and nationalist movements of earlier periods," and "less committed to totalizing ideologies, grand theories, and broad organizations" (2003, 67). Additionally, Mahdi asserts:

[T]wo decades of ideological and political work by the IRI to force a collectivist identity on the Iranian woman have not only failed to produce the desired outcome but have actually given rise to a desire to strike a balance between the extremes of Western individualism and Islamic collectivism. Women have become less concerned about political power, revolution and ideology. They are more concerned with control of their own lives within political, social and economic institutions, whatever the ideological configurations of those institutions (Mahdi 2003, 67).

The campaign certainly reflects this trend, as my interviewees repeatedly emphasized decentralization, individual agency, and flexibility.

One activist asserted that the campaign was even part of an epochal trend in the world towards inclusive, democratic, non-ideological movements, including the movements for democratization in Eastern Europe:

[I]t's not only the characteristic of the campaign, it's worldwide, during these last two decades. It started in Eastern Europe, places that started with democratic, peaceful movements through grassroots organizations or grassroots campaigns, with no leader or specific leadership. So it's kind of worldwide. (interview with a campaigner, October 23, 2009)

This emphasis on individual agency and leaderlessness, as opposed to ideologically-laden and top-down movements, according to another activist, has also allowed the campaign to

keep going even as some members are targeted, harassed, arrested, or jailed. As one campaigner noted:

If you look at the movements historically in Iran, there has been like some sort of a hierarchy, you know. And even like the unions and even the student organizations. ... [I]t's been easier to crack down on those movements because they have been able to imprison the leaders and let's say, bring them on television. You see your leaders confess, you see your leaders break down. And somehow the organizations really suffer because of that. The campaign has really used that historical background to not make those kind [*sic*] of mistakes and I think that one reason why they've been so successful is because the campaign didn't make the mistake of becoming that sort of hierarchical, you know, organization. Even though there are some key figures within campaign, there are some key figures that we all know, and that...Islamic Republic [*sic*] can target. But it's not like you can take the leaders of this group and execute them and suddenly the group no longer has a direction. And that has been a key success. (interview with a campaigner, October 23, 2009)

The importance of inclusivity, democratic practice, and no centralized leadership within the campaign has facilitated its transnational scope. While the campaign originated in Iran and is based in several provinces there, the network structure enables activists as far away as California to participate in ways that often don't distinguish them from their counterparts in Iran. When asked how the California group began, this activist answered:

I was part of this social networking website and there was a forum there, and we were chatting with other people on the forum about women's rights. We were talking about this campaign and there were some other people who were interested. Some of them were in other countries. But then there was one person who was in Southern California. We were like, ok, we're going to go meet up. And so I just met up with this stranger, and we decided we should email the campaign in Iran and see if we can start something. We did and they were like sure, we don't give permissions. If you like it, do it. So we started, and they were really nice and supportive and kind of helped us along. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

This synergistic relationship between Iranian campaign activists in California and those in Iran points to new kinds of political cultures enabled by this post-ideological moment

in Iranian politics, and also by new technologies like the Internet that help connect activists across the world.

Other activists echoed this emphasis on a non- or post-ideological moment in Iranian politics, pointing to the ways in which the campaign and the women's movement have been at the forefront of this new praxis. As one interviewee says about the campaign activists in Iran:

They kind of developed a culture of, you know even if they weren't completely successful in linking, for example, the workers rights movement with the women's movement, they tried. They brought up this force and they tried to build this culture, and the fact that the non-hierarchical thing is something, you know it's the Internet, and the fact that the women's movement really worked on that and tried it, and saw that it works. And the other thing was that it wasn't ideological. And this is interesting, and it might not make sense to Americans, because Americans don't really, I mean the ideological doesn't really happen in America. Maybe you can say some people vote according to whether or not they're pro-choice or anti-choice or whatever. That would be an ideological choice. But in Iran, or in Iranian community in Southern California, everything is about your ideology. And your ideology could be your religion, could be your political view. Most of the time, it's your political view. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

As a leaderlessness, post-ideological, and cyber-connected network, the campaign offers an appealing, flexible and democratic way for members to plug in. As the above campaigner continues, the campaign structure allows people to work together across differences that might have seemed insurmountable in the past.

The campaign, because it wasn't, I mean not just because it wasn't hierarchical, it was defined as anybody can join, anybody can be part of this movement. There's no centralized group that can tell you yes or no. So nobody asks you what you believe in, nobody asks you what you do, nobody asks, where else are you active? If you support this campaign, you can be part of it. So that's something I think that is very valuable in the Iranian community, focusing on that one thing and being able to work together on that one thing, even if you completely disagree on some other things. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

Here, the non-ideological, democratic practice of the campaign, and the interplay between activists in different locations and their shared political community enabled through the Internet reflect both Mahdi's characterization of women's post-revolutionary activism and what Nayereh Tohidi (2002) calls the "interplay" between local and global politics. As Tohidi argues, global feminism is "comprised of feminist discourses, the international women's movement, and transnational feminist networks" (2002, 851). The campaign, as one such transnational feminist network, is an example of what Tohidi, drawing on Alberto Melucci in Eschle (2001), calls "fragmented, heterogeneous, and dynamic forms of collective action, continually reconstructed through diffuse, decentralized, and subterranean networks...in the 'Information Age'" (Tohidi 2002, 856). Moghadam (2005) draws on Castells (2000) to argue that networks have become the predominant mode of feminist organizing: "As Manuel Castells argues, the advantages of networks are flexibility and adaptability, which are especially conducive to conditions of rapid change, such as the current era of globalization" (Moghadam 2005, 81). Further drawing on Castells, Moghadam adds that new information technologies like the Internet have strengthened the capacity of networks to perform tasks previously carried out by more centralized organizations, and facilitated new transnational connections "among political actors across borders" (Moghadam 2005, 81).

These dynamic networks radically destabilize the local and global as always already counterpoised and distinct sites; instead, they point to the ways that such dynamic networks produce transnational flows of ideas, information and relations that open up and destabilize the boundaries of the local and global. In this sense, these networks can also undermine the power imbalances between elites who come to staff or represent global

feminist organizations and those working on the ground, who receive no personal recognition or remuneration (Alvarez 1999; Desai 2005).

Tohidi argues that the Iranian feminist diaspora has strengthened transnational feminist networks, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the campaign. Tohidi asserts:

Diaspora women activists have contributed to the women's movement inside Iran at different levels, including the political, informational, theoretical, technical, and organizational. They have made these contributions through teaching, research, women's activist groups, and more recently, Internet sites (Tohidi 2002, 878).

The campaign network, with its campaign website, email lists and connections between those in Iran and the diaspora, points to the ways in which new transnational political spaces and cultures are created that challenge national and regional boundaries.

This is not to say, however, that national boundaries and the authority and power of nation-states are irrelevant. What was striking in my interviews was the ways in which sometimes the campaign activists would speak from their locations in the U.S., while at other times, they spoke as Iranians deeply tied to Iran. These different identifications and dis-identifications were primarily about the ways in which their locations in the U.S. enabled particular kinds of privileges, but also very clear restraints. Moreover, this sense of shifting locations shows how different diasporic populations explode the rigid binaries established around center/periphery, national/transnational, local/global and West/rest. As Grewal and Kaplan argue, transnational feminist practices look at the ways diasporic communities are “multiply organized” outside of essentialist or universal ideas of what is home and what is the diaspora (1994, 16). As the next section shows, the diasporic network of the campaign must be understood more complexly through its “specific agenda and politics” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 16).

Negotiating Location: Diaspora

As part of a larger Iranian diaspora in Southern California,⁴ the campaigners face opposition from Iranians whose political affiliations are much different from theirs.

Mostofi (2003) describes Southern California Iranians in the following way.

These immigrants are, for the most part, products of the Pahlavi era, in that they were economically prosperous, inclined to Western influence, and belonged to Iran's newly formed, predominantly secular middle class (Kelly and Friedlander 1993, p. 5). They were the majority class in Iran who not only immigrated with the principles of Westernization, secularization, urbanization, and modernization but also with traditional "Persian" and anti-Islamic, therefore anti-Muslim, ideals. They immigrated to Southern California prior to or soon after the Islamic Revolution. They came to the United States as professional or entrepreneurial immigrants living in exile while creating an identity in diaspora based on these notions (Mostofi 2003, 683).

In their work in Southern California, campaigners often have to field hostile reactions from this diaspora majority, staunch secularists who have been away from Iran for a long time, do not support reform efforts in Iran, and have deep anti-Muslim biases. When I asked campaigners what some of their challenges are, most identified the hostility from the Southern California diaspora as a major obstacle to their work. The following exchange between these two campaigners illustrates the ways in which some of the diaspora is still steeped in ideological battle.

Activist 1: They don't believe in the whole system. They don't believe in reform. And it's a challenge talking to them.

Activist 2: Actually once, in Berkeley, there was a human rights panel, it was three days, and the campaign had a panel from the program. So people start cursing us, like "I want to spit on you. You are the ones who are helping this government to survive." So this is how they look at it. They don't like to hear anything good out of Iran. I've seen them, like when they talk about all the executions, stoning, everything.

⁴ According to U.S. Census data from 2000, of the 338,266 Iranians living in the United States, 159,016 lived in California (U.S. Census 2000). According to U.S. Census data from 2010, 463,552 Iranians are living in the United States (U.S. Census 2010). Numbers for California were unavailable.

Me: What can they say now? The reform movement just got even bigger.⁵

Activist 2: Now I think they just don't say anything. They better not say anything. But they really don't like to hear about any changes, because I think they think, you're here because of all these bad things and we can't go back to Iran, because they're going to kill us. But eighty percent, ninety percent of them, if they go back, nothing is going to happen. Nobody is going to touch them. But they have to keep that imagination for themselves in order to survive and be a nationalist. (interview with campaigners, October 22, 2009)

In this exchange, nationalism is referenced as secular nationalism of the Shah era. In this nostalgic framing, anti-Islamic diasporic Iranians erase the massive repression of secular and religious critics of the Shah, and consolidate the Orientalist rendering of the Islamic Republic as a static and immutable space. Positioning the diaspora through its various agendas and politics, as Grewal and Kaplan suggest, shows how affiliations are made through political struggles rather than fixed identities.

Theorizing the different political and affective allegiances of the Iranian diaspora in Southern California requires a politics of location attentive to transnational feminist praxis. As Kaplan argues, a politics of location “is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be reestablished and reaffirmed” (1994, 139). Indeed, the campaigners in Southern California represent a minority political view within the larger Southern California diaspora. Like their counterparts in Iran, they believe in change from within Iran and the possibility for engagement with the state. They contest the hegemonic narrative emanating from the diaspora majority that “nothing good” can come from within the Islamic Republic. While this narrative circulates within neoconservative and neoliberal Western discourses alike, when it comes from within the larger Iranian diaspora, it intensifies the “civilizational” discourses that construct Islam as inherently repressive. Here, this activist illustrates the

⁵ Here I'm referencing the 2009 post-election Green movement.

ways in which the diaspora majority in Southern California, hostile to Islam, forecloses the possibility of change from within:

But most of the conversation, if it comes up about Islam, they are against Islam. They say, “What are you talking about, this is all Islam, Islam is to blame for this.” And Iranians, because religion has been either shoved down our throat or shoved out of our throat, whatever you want to call it, we’re all very passionate for or against it. People blame Islam, they say unless you change that we can’t change anything. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

As this campaigner shows, alliances among Iranians based on “essential” categories of identity cannot be assumed. Many other campaigners I interviewed spoke of similar experiences of hostility from the diaspora majority, and how challenging it was for them to reframe the terms of the debate when engaging with those in the diaspora majority.

As most campaigners I spoke with told me, they constantly work against the hegemonic narrative coming from parts of the diaspora majority that rights for women inhere in the putative secular cultural and political space of the United States, making it a safe harbor for women, and that an “essential” Islam is to blame for women’s oppression.

As the campaigner above continues:

And then we have argue with them and say, well you know, or sometimes they say it’s because of the Islamic Republic, and we say, well you know, even in America, if you think about it, women’s rights activist have to fight for their rights here. They don’t have Islam here. They don’t have an Islamic Republic here. They have somewhat of a democratic system set up and women don’t have equal rights. So we have to have that conversation and just kind of get people to think that there’s a complex situation. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

To shift the narrative from a civilizational discourse about Islam versus secular democracy to one in which women from different contexts might engage in shared political struggles, the campaigners use a transnational feminist politics of location that disrupts the multiple binaries enforced by the diaspora majority.

As Kaplan (1994) claims, transnational feminist praxis builds ties across geographical and other divides, and renders similarity and difference in historical, rather than essentializing, terms.

A transnational politics of location in the best sense of these terms refers us to the model of coalition or, to borrow a term from Edward Said, to affiliation. As a practice of affiliation, a politics of location identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances. (Kaplan 1994, 119)

As activists within a larger diasporic community, one might assume a naturalized affiliation among all diasporic Iranians. However, the pragmatic politics of reform the campaigners utilize are often met with hostility and cynicism from strict secularists, whose Islamophobic discourses reinforce binaries around religion and secularism, repression and democracy, Iran and the West. Subsequently, the campaigners in Southern California aim to build a coalitional politics around transnational affiliations that break down these binaries and build solidarity between feminists in different locations. But as they work to support and amplify the work of those inside Iran, campaigners in the diaspora are met with a whole other set of conditions they must gingerly navigate.

Negotiating Location: Empire

In terms of amplifying and supporting the campaign in Iran, the U.S.-based Iranian activists I interviewed stressed again and again that they would not do anything to jeopardize the safety of those in Iran. As I discuss in the last chapter, the hardliner's control of the state since 2004, the failures of Khatami's reform era, and the rhetorical war on Iran waged by the Bush administration have bolstered the Iranian state's security apparatuses, leaving activists vulnerable to harassment, imprisonment, torture, even

death. These actions have been rationalized by the state, as labor, student and feminist activists, including many from the campaign, have been accused of endangering national security. The state's tactics have only become more intense and violent since the 2009 Green movement, leaving activists as vulnerable as ever.⁶

This political maneuvering of the state has deep roots, and has always been about the Iranian state's engagement on a geopolitical level with the West in general and U.S. in particular. The U.S.-backed coup of 1953, the top-down modernizing program of the Shah and his father, and the Shah's deep pandering to the U.S. have all meant that while not formerly colonized, Iranian people and politics have been shaped by decades of imperialist motives and interventions, which has created resentment among most sectors of society. The revolution and Khomeini's anti-U.S. rhetoric were deep challenges to Western hegemony in the region. Yet the particular post-revolutionary nationalism required concessions many women were unwilling to make, and any kind of opposition to the state, as Tohidi writes, was labeled as "Westoxification" or "*gharbzadeh*" (2002, 859). In the first International Women's Day rally after the revolution, protesting the restrictive policies Khomeini had begun to implement, women challenged this notion with the slogan "Freedom is neither Eastern nor Western; it is Universal!" (Tohidi 2002, 860). While the Khatami reform period was marked by overtures to the West and U.S., Ahmadijad has resurrected such anti-West discourse, bolstered by U.S. government's rhetorical war against Iran. Interestingly, a parallel discourse to Khomeini's and Ahmadijad's has emerged from parts of the U.S. left, which claims that the democratic opposition movements in Iran are a project of Western imperialism. Iranian feminists are

⁶ I interviewed activists four months after the elections, immediately after the Green movement's summer of mass protests. Interviewees responses in this section reflect strategies used before June 2009, which became even more important in the post-election period.

pushing back against both of these troubling discourses, which enact a massive erasure of Iranian women's grassroots activism.

This U.S.-Iran standoff has put enormous pressures on the campaign network, as involvement in the campaign by the diaspora could intensify the leveling of accusations of support from the U.S., giving ballast to the state's charge of "national security threat."

As one activist says:

The way we talk in interviews, the way we write articles, reports, we say over and over that its like a movement from the heart of people, within people, and we kind of focus to say its non-partisan...all of these things that are like the core values, we try to repeat them over and over and then, even when you want to talk about the government, we try never say regime [*sic*], we say government. We don't say who is putting pressure, we say there is a lot of pressure on women's rights activists in Iran. We say there is a lot of security, we don't say, like Ahmedinejad increased the security, we say, like,...security has increased. You know, this whole verbiage that doesn't point [to] somebody, but if you're smart enough, you would know what we're talking about. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

These considerations underscore the deep connections among people in the network based on shared struggles that take into account the different social, political and geographical locations that make up their transnational network. The emphasis on not further endangering women in Iran is a central component of the kind of feminist solidarity many transnational feminist networks, a particular practice often overlooked by large, stratified NGOs and human rights regimes. As this activist asserts, "A big portion of all our conversations for whatever we want to do spins on the fact that what we do here, how does it affect people in Iran? And we kind of make sure and double check they don't have to pay the price for what we say here, how we act here, all of those things" (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009).

Activists in the U.S. recognize that they are both of the campaign and of the U.S., and they constantly negotiate these different positionalities. They keep foremost in their praxis what does distinguish them from their Iranian counterparts in this particular moment, the physical space to assemble, and what constraints they share with them, primarily the nuance and delicacy with which they frame their discourses. This activist reflects on the ways in which her multiple locations can both enable and limit her:

I think that the one thing that we have that has been amazing. It's not freedom to express ourselves however we want because we are associated, we have the name of the campaign, and we definitely don't want to do something that, you know if I feel like a certain way about something, even that's a feminist issue in the U.S., I might not come out very publicly and talk about it because I publicly talk about the campaign and I don't want that to be associated. So in that sense of expressing ourselves however we want, we don't have that freedom just because we're associated with the campaign. They can get the consequences. But in the sense that we can assemble and talk to each other freely, that is an amazing thing that we have that the activists in Iran don't have. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

Many other interviewees echoed this campaigner's cautions, recognizing that support from their location in the heart of empire could further intensify the internal repression in Iran.

As they built bonds of solidarity and support across national lines, campaigners in Southern California took the lead from activists immersed in the political situation on the ground in Iran.

It used to be easier for them, and as time went by there were more pressures and more pressures, and that just can completely devastate a movement, I think. And what the intelligence ministry in Iran have done is exactly that, they put pressure on each one of them, they just kind of want to slowly suffocate them, and you know, we don't have sentences, or we don't have court cases going on. The activists in Iran, on a daily basis, they end up going, like somebody from the campaign is at the revolutionary court with her or his case. They get threatened if they try to meet up somewhere, and so it's hard to, that's why it makes things hard, when you can't meet up and talk about things, it just, yeah, that's, it makes

things immensely harder, and I really admire their resilience, and creativity in dealing with things like that. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

Like this activist, none of the activists I interviewed were praiseworthy of the U.S. as a space of absolute freedom, nor did they critique Iran as inherently repressive, explicitly rejecting the hegemonic and essentialist narratives evoked in ahistorical neoconservative and neoliberal discourses about the U.S. as the emissary of human rights and Iran as timelessly, statically repressive. Indeed, many interviewees had strong critiques of U.S. political and cultural life and suggested that U.S. feminists had much to glean from the campaign. However, they did understand the precise nature of their privileges, using them to support and fortify the campaign.

The particular strategic, methodological, and discursive negotiations of Iranian diasporic activists of the campaign network around issues of location and security point to the kinds of effective practices and affective bonds constituted by and through this innovative movement. The campaign network prioritizes the safety and security of those most affected by transnational political decisions and actions—those inside Iran. This set of practices stands in stark contrast to some of the modes of “solidarity” activism practiced by activists in the U.S. and other parts of the West, from international human rights interventions to identifications with putative anti-imperialist leaders from the global South (the enemy of my enemy is my friend), that ultimately intensify the vulnerability of the very political actors these interventions claim to solidarize with.⁷

Campaign activists had the burden of educating Western feminists about these particular sets of dilemmas and restraints, as the campaign began getting recognition and

⁷ For analyses of troubling kinds of solidarity interventions, see Massad (2002) and Shalakany (2007). For an alternative model of solidarity, see the statement by the Raha Iranian Feminist Collective in *Jaddilaya* (2011).

awards from Western feminists. In 2009, the campaign received the Global Women's Rights Award from the Feminist Majority Foundation, an award from *Glamour Magazine*, and was the recipient of the European Simone de Beauvoir Award for Women's Freedom. On the one hand, this attention garnered more transnational recognition for the campaign. The campaign proudly and publicly displays their awards on the website. On the other hand, this laser-like attention made it easier for the Iranian state to target activists inside Iran. Moreover, these awards were not just congratulatory; they came with money, money the campaign ultimately decided, after days and days of debate and discussion, to refuse in order to protect the activists inside Iran and immunize the campaign against internal divisions.

As many of my interviewees reported, these awards and their prize monies created a whole set of tensions within the campaign, tensions around who would accept the awards, given the horizontal nature of the network, and whether or not to accept the monies. As this exchange between one campaigner and me reveals, international support for the campaign can sometimes, in fact, undermine it:

Campaigner: Transnational and international supports sometimes are mixed blessing.

Me: Would you say especially from American support?

Campaigner: Yeah, American support, even European support, even these prizes. I have been like, whenever I have been consulted by policy makers and all these foundations want to do something about Iran, I said, Yeah. It's good, give them prizes, echo them, echo their voices, support them rather than telling them what to do. But then even these prizes, for example, recently, even I am getting uncomfortable with some of the communications that, uh, the competition that it can create among people. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

On the one hand, transnational support and recognition drew much needed attention to the work of the activists in Iran, amplifying their work to a larger audience, something

most if not all campaigners would certainly desire. On the other hand, this recognition created a whole set of new dilemmas and tensions for the campaigners, and affected their relationships with one another.

As many of the activists told me, the campaigners in Iran and the diaspora spent many painstaking hours and days in online and offline conversations, discussing and debating the issues that emerged as each award was conferred. Deeply committed to retaining the campaign's horizontal structure, activists were confronted with difficult decisions about who would represent the campaign when receiving awards. Campaigners came up with a strategy to ask those granting awards to award the campaign as a whole and not individuals,⁸ but even this didn't resolve dilemmas that had taken root. As the activist above continues:

That's why we are trying to say instead of giving the prizes to an individual, give it to the whole campaign. But then when you want to give it to the whole campaign, then the question is, who is going to accept the prize, who's going to be in the forefront, right? That usually happens to be the people who are centered in Tehran, who know some language, who are more or better connected to the Western sources, right? And they're the ones who can travel easily. That also itself creates resentment in the provinces for those who have harder time, and paying higher prices with their own lives, time, money, getting imprisoned, all that. But [they are not] the ones who are getting recognition and advantages of it. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

While committed to horizontalism and democratic practice, clearly the very real differences in class, education, transnational connections, and mobility among campaigners could not ultimately be transcended, and the awards surfaced and even exacerbated these differences.

Perhaps the biggest dilemma campaigners faced was how to handle the prize money that came with the awards. This activist continues:

⁸ In 2007, campaigner Parvin Ardalan was awarded the Olaf Palme Award, and in 2008 campaigner Nasrin Sotoudeh was awarded the International Human Rights Award of Italy (Moghadam and Gheytonchi 2010).

And then another thing is that we have to forgive all this financial aspects of these prizes, which is a big deprivation, right? I was talking with [another campaign activist] just a few weeks ago, she was telling me that, *Glamour*, for example, *Glamour Magazine* was giving this prize and they were contacting me and then we put them in contact with someone in Iran, and they were giving good money. And we had to say, unfortunately we can't take it. But this is such good money, we could do so many things with this money. I remember [another campaign activist] said, let's get the money and build a few schools in these villages for girls. But then, who's going to do that? Who are we going to give the money to? Then that's going to create a lot of problems. The regime is going to arrest those people who got the money and take the money, right? And also stigmatize the campaign, [and say] "see we told you that they have got [Western money]." All these terrible decisions and the dilemmas that we have. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

These decisions and dilemmas are indeed terrible, produced by the larger structuring mechanisms of war, imperialism and the long history of U.S. encroachment on Iran. As the U.S. engages war by other means—under George W. Bush, the designation of Iran as an axis of evil; under Obama and his hawkish Secretary of State, containment, isolation and sanctions—the Iranian state pushes back through a discourse of anti-imperialism, and a practice of internal repression. All activists, including the campaigners, are caught in this fraught triangulation, as any opposition or challenge to the state is labeled as Western-backed. Any kind of transnational support and recognition, then, particularly if it confers monies, increase the target status of campaign activists. As the campaigners made the decision to reject any outside monies, they tried to immunize themselves against heightened targeting by the Iranian state. But this decision cost them much needed resources.

Against this geopolitical backdrop, campaigners have had to fight for the space to articulate their own feminist politics, which are both transnational and anti-imperialist. Moreover, their political commitments to democratic practice are constantly tested, as transnational recognition threatens to impose unnecessary divisions among activists.

Indeed, the very activist labor—all of the affective, strategic, and political work that goes into enacting such a horizontal politics, and that can never be fully quantified—is intensified, as campaigners work against internal divisions created by outside pressures.

As the activist above claims:

And then some of the people who are getting the awards just as individuals, why this and not that? Why she [*sic*] and not her? She has been working [hard]. ... For example, someone like [another campaign activist], who has done so much for the movement, who is so key for this movement, she has decided not to give interviews, not to travel, she traveled once and she said that's it, not to travel outside, not to leave Iran, not to accept any scholarship, not any prizes. Because she says, this way, it's easier for her. It just is. I just can't, you know, don't want these things. And then, [people say] are you crazy? I mean, you could get all these prizes. ... And then, then of course, I'm sure when she sees that people who are less deserving are getting these prizes and all this international fame and traveling to this place, that place, I'm sure she's going to feel like, what am I doing here? Just sacrificing everything. So it is, that's why this is such a hard, I mean, this international attention, it's kind of like a double-edged sword.

Me: Of course, it's very difficult to negotiate and navigate.

Campaigner: And it can impact your priority or discourse. Why campaign, why not other movements? Or other, you know, for example, there are groups who work on violence, they're smaller groups, there are those who work on health issues. Why they are not getting prizes? Why they are not getting all this attention? All these are legitimate concerns. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

Altogether, this was an incredibly profound exchange, one which summarized the deeply complex terrain of transnational feminism in the context of the geopolitical forces at work today. The effects of international visibility from Western feminists are not just greater recognition of the campaign, but increased targeting of individual activists, and exacerbated tensions among activists trying very hard to work against internal hierarchies and power differentials. This campaigner's last question about why the campaign, and not other grassroots groups, has received so much attention points to the ways in which even well-intentioned feminists from the West are often ignorant of the local politics of

whichever groups becomes their “darlings” of the moment. While the campaign certainly wants international support and recognition, it desires this on its own terms and in ways that don’t further endanger activists inside Iran.

Indeed, as I lay out more fully in the next sections, building transnational feminist affiliation is, perhaps, more difficult than ever. For Iranian feminists in Iran and the United States, struggling to create networks of solidarity with each other and build coalitions with Western feminists against the backdrop of the Global War on Terror, and all the histories of colonialism and Western encroachment the current moment intensifies, are acts of tremendous faith, hope, and courage. In its travels, feminism comes up against, becomes entangled in, and often becomes an alibi for war and state repression (Eisenstein 2007; Puar 2007). Given such dangerous intersections between war, imperialism and feminism, transnational feminist theory has necessarily devoted much of its theoretical labor and power to a critique of these conditions.

But I believe a crisis has emerged in much recent transnational feminist theorizing. What began as a powerful critique and equally powerful praxis, I argue, has morphed into a crisis of impossibility. The possibilities for transnational affiliation and coalition which challenge the contemporary geopolitical order are being drowned by an ever louder focus on and fear of what might be called feminist governmentality—the imbrication and intensification of hegemonic forms of feminism within circuits of war, colonialism and neoliberalism. While I don’t take issue with such governmentality as the mode of politics now globally hegemonic, I am concerned that such an intensive focus on *only* the perils of transnational feminist engagement produces unintended and quite undesired effects.

Given the escalation of all the crises that transnational feminist praxis originally responded to, it is all the more imperative to maintain the possibility for transnational feminist solidarity. Understanding transnational feminism only as critique, however, and silencing its epistemological, political and affective potentiality truncates the depth and breadth of analysis that transnational feminist praxis can still offer. While I don't position transnational feminist praxis as a "way out" of contemporary geopolitical relations, I call into question what have become its accepted norms. This is not to wield critique for the sake of critique, but to rethink, reanimate, indeed revisit and deepen transnational feminist analysis through the rich and complex praxis of Iranian feminists working transnationally against many odds. As the campaigners carve out a space for their political affiliations, strategies and commitments, they are creating an alternative to the dangerous triangulations that constantly threaten to entrap and silence their project.

Transnational Feminism: Perils, Promises, More Perils

The vision of transnational feminism remains, on the one hand, deeply inspirational and on the other, profoundly difficult to realize. For those working for gender justice for whom a truly comprehensive women's movement and nothing less than the broadest vision of feminism are key goals, how do we attend to the realities of local, national, regional, and other kinds of boundaries while also trying to rise above them and build larger networks, organizations and movements? How do we navigate the tightrope that binds macro-political structures to the micro-climates that shape local work? How do women in different corners of the globe build and sustain relationships of solidarity, trust and collectivity while honoring and preserving their own and others' specificities and

differences? How do we avoid the pitfalls of earlier invocations of global and international feminisms? These are only a few of the key questions that have animated transnational feminism for the last two decades.

The field of transnational feminism grew out of the desire for cross-border collaboration around activism and scholarship that marked earlier international and global feminisms, yet incorporated post-colonial and anti-racist critiques of universalism, cultural imperialism, neo-liberalism and Western hegemony. The critique of universalism shed light on the ways in which the global scale flattened out important differences among women (geography, class, race, etc.) and centered the experiences of Western white, middle-class women as the norm. Unexamined universalist feminism and invocations of “sisterhood” as “global” tended to reproduce and entrench the hegemony of the West and Western feminists within global spaces. As Moallem notes, “Western universalizing feminism [is] undercut by multiple forms of transnational subjectivities and resistance to new forms of subjugation” (1999, 342).

Transnational feminism also questioned the boundaries, meaning and relevance of “the national,” and identified connections within, above and beyond the nation-state as sites of power and oppression, as well as agency. Grewal and Kaplan (1994) argued for a new analysis of “scattered hegemonies,” more dispersed and less centralized sites of power and resistance. They suggested that transnational flows of economy, politics and culture must be analyzed for their multi-directionality, radically destabilizing the notion that power flows “from the West to the rest” or from the “core to the periphery.” Their argument challenged rigid binaries between North and South, economic and cultural,

opening up space for and contributing to ideas about borders and hybridities, and the complexity of social locations and subjectivities that defy a binary logic.

For scholars and activists attentive to global power imbalances, transnational feminist politics have the potential to offer an alternative to global capitalism, war, poverty and all systems of hierarchy, exploitation and domination that deeply infuse all local realities. While universalist global “sisterhood” is problematic, dangerous, and largely discredited among those doing transnational work, the desire for solidarity, collective power, and community remain at the heart of many feminist activist and scholarly endeavors. Out of transnational feminist work have come new political strategies and theoretical insights, and vibrant, long-lasting networks.

Some scholars claim that regardless of its most pressing challenges, transnational feminism has been the most effective way of confronting serious global injustices against women. Moghadam (1996) argues that transnational feminist movements have been able to challenge problems like structural inequality more effectively than local movements because these injustices are products of and responses to globalization, which force particular links between women. Transnational feminist movements can potentially leverage far more powerful and successful responses than can local movements. For instance, privileged women’s entry into the workforce in the global North has produced a crisis in care whereby they hire women from the global South to fulfill their gendered obligations for children and domestic labor. Transnational feminist analyses and movements see all women linked through the gendered expectation that care work is women’s work, yet recognize that women have different positions and experiences within

the global care chain based on race, class, nationality, as well as other factors (Kang 2010; Parreñas 2008).

Transnational feminism has also been an effective response to local patriarchies and religious fundamentalisms that have consolidated power through transnational alliances. For example, the Vatican has forged coalitions with patriarchal secular, Protestant, Islamic and Jewish campaigns to curtail women's reproductive and sexual lives. Feminists have responded by building activist networks through UN conferences. These networks continue to challenge transnational patriarchy and also work to shift dominant understandings of fundamentalism. Instead of the hegemonic framing of Islam as inherently patriarchal and fundamentalist, transnational feminist networks look at the similarities between patriarchal interpretations of women's reproductive and sexual lives that spring from all kinds of (but not all) religious and secular sites. Transnational feminist networks like the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders also offer an alternative religious framework based on social justice and women's equality. Their work unsettles the regnant notion that justice for women can only be achieved through secular frameworks.

Transnational feminisms are promising precisely because they acknowledge similarities and differences between women as products of history and politics, not women's "essential" natures or geographical locations. As Mackie (2001) argues:

In many cases, women will form links across national boundaries because they feel that their situation is similar to that of women in other countries. This is a notion of similarity based on social location rather than nationality, ethnicity or a simple binary notion of gender. ... In other cases, it is not similarity which brings women together, but a recognition of mutual imbrication in structures of inequality, which privilege some while placing others in a situation of oppression, repression or exploitation. (Mackie 2001, 194-195)

Transnational feminist praxis highlights how women are connected along axes of power, and points to possibilities for solidarity that disrupt rather than reproduce relations of inequality and domination.

Exchanges between and solidarity among women around “shared contexts of struggle” (Mohanty 2003) can lead to new theoretical and political insights. For instance, women of color around the world have challenged the narrow focus of the reproductive rights movement on abortion, expanding the framework to one of reproductive justice which looks at the necessary conditions that would make all women’s reproductive choices meaningful. Through long-term collaboration and struggle, transnational feminist work can restructure power within women’s movements, foregrounding the theoretical and activist contributions and leadership of women from the global South. From the UN conferences and gatherings of women to the more recent World Social Forum feminist networking to the multiple grassroots movements that meet up at more informal sites, the desire among feminists for something more effective than their local movements at confronting transnational governmentality and transforming the world remains alive.

Feminism and Governmentality

Despite the potential and notable successes of transnational feminist politics, building transnational alliances presents a host of challenges. Doing transnational politics within the context of Western/U.S. hegemony and deep global imbalances between the North and South means that transnational feminism can sometimes reinscribe and reproduce such power differentials. Basu (2000) argues that despite the work of transnational feminism to interrogate Western hegemony and inequalities between

women of the North and South, economic and political power differentials remain difficult to eradicate. Cultural imperialism (the idea that all that emanates from the West is best) continues to create problematic slippages in which women from the global North, and the U.S. in particular, see themselves as global/cosmopolitan/liberated and women from the global South as local/parochial/oppressed (Basu 1995; Mohanty 1991).

This discourse has deep roots in nineteenth century Western colonialism, as well as the histories of Christian missions and anthropological representations of “Other” women. “Colonial feminism” (Ahmed 1992) has profoundly shaped the production of knowledge about women in the global South in general, and the Middle East in particular. As Ahmed argues, discourses of Muslim and Middle Eastern women as oppressed victims of inherently patriarchal societies have deep roots in colonial Egypt. In 19th century Egypt, colonizers and Egyptian elites argued for the “liberation” of women through modernizing projects that benefited those Egyptians largely oriented towards the West, but excluded most Egyptians, deepening class divisions within Egypt. Colonial reforms in education, work and the family drew on the vast archive of Orientalist texts and images that produced gross misunderstandings of Islam, and removal of the veil became part of the occupiers’ strategy for undermining Egyptian (and subsequently Algerian, Iraqi, Afghan, etc) culture. The British colonizers were against any feminist reforms within their own countries, and the Egyptian elites who espoused feminist ideals were mostly elite men who sought to benefit from the colonial economy. It is this moment, and this new discourse on women, that is responsible for inextricably linking the question of “women’s status” with much broader questions about class, culture, “progress,” control, independence and the future of the Middle East.

Abu-Lughod traces contemporary discourses about “saving Muslim women” in the post-9/11 context to these older colonialist tropes. Analyzing her own conversations with reporters after 9/11 and Laura Bush’s post-9/11 address to the nation, she argues:

[T]he question is why knowing about the “culture” of the region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the regions and the U.S. role in this history. Such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burquas. (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784).

This has been the predominant trope framing representations of women from Iran, the Middle East, and the larger Muslim world.

These political implications of representation underscore the ways in which knowledge production of “others” is always complicit in relations of power. Spivak (1988) argues that the dual notions of representation, to represent aesthetically and politically get conflated, leading to a misrecognition by Western feminists of the ways in which seemingly benign knowledge projects reproduce modes of domination, exclusion and silencing of the very women they seek to “represent.” Western feminist scholarship on women from the global South—on work, reproduction, sexuality, etc.—can reproduce monolithic representations of the “oppressed Third World woman,” without the capacity for agency.

One can see this problem play out, for instance, in the human rights framework, as I noted in Chapter 2. On the one hand, the human rights framework travels so ubiquitously, it can be one of the most effective ways of redressing women’s oppression,

particularly when notions of women's "rights" are implemented in culturally specific ways. A human rights framework can garner legitimacy in the eyes of NGO donors, the state, or other formal institutions and actors. On the other hand, because Western neoliberal discourses are globally dominant, the plethora of rights language and meanings is often pared down to the narrowest (most hegemonic) set of concepts. What gets included in the markers of what it means to be a fully agentic woman then, is a thin set of signs: secular (or privately religious and/or unveiled), publicly sexual, consumerist, cosmopolitan, etc. Western women are seen as rights-bearing, responsible for "saving" their rights-needing Third World sisters.

These rescue narratives were manifest in the rhetorical strategies of the George W. Bush Administration, which deployed discourses of global feminism (liberating Afghani, then Iraqi women) as a rationale for war and occupation, meanwhile actively working against feminism in the U.S. Many feminists, though anti-war and critical of the Bush Administration, followed suit.⁹ Witness also the *Time* magazine cover featuring an Afghan woman disfigured by her husband.¹⁰ The title of the cover story, "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan?" suggests that U.S. imperial presence in Afghanistan is the only means of "saving" Afghan women. There is no analysis of how U.S. imperialism has actually worsened conditions for women by exacerbating the cycle of permanent war. Nor is there an analysis of how the violence of war creates a cycle of violent responses, including spousal abuse or murder by returning U.S. soldiers, their own suicides, or the violence of poverty and environmental destruction that war produces. The construction of Afghan women as "sympathetic victims" needing rescue by U.S. soldiers, what Spivak

⁹ See Katha Pollitt's columns in *The Nation*.

¹⁰ *Time Magazine* (July 29, 2010).

(1988) calls “white men saving brown women from brown men,” reinforces the colonial narrative that Third World women, as Uma Narayan (1997) argues, suffer “death by culture.” As I noted in Chapter 2, this bifurcation of “culture” and “rights” works to position non-Western women as suffering from an “excess” of essentialized (inherently patriarchal and repressive) culture, therefore in need of rescue from (inherently liberated) rights-bearing Western women.

But wartime rhetoric is not the only place where “saving” and “rescue” narratives surface, nor is it the only discursive arena for marking global power imbalances among women. A persistent conflict within transnational feminism is around the proliferation of transnational NGOs. Some scholars argue that transnational NGOs have become bureaucratic and exclusive, creating new divisions between elite feminists who further the interests of the institutions of global governance and women doing feminist work “on the ground” (Alvarez 1999; Batliwala 2002; Desai 2005; Snyder 2005). Critics ask to what extent the UN—the staging ground for much of the work of transnational feminism—will ever be fully accessible to feminists or if it will remain a mostly masculine, bureaucratic and hierarchical institution. If the latter, the UN focus on “women’s issues” ultimately separates feminist activism away from the very issues – war, poverty, environmental destruction – that destroy many women’s lives.

This NGOification of the women’s movement means that only the narrowest issues, those that can be articulated within the framework of global governance and deemed winnable, get raised at the transnational level. For instance, violence against women has achieved recognition as a global problem to which the majority of people are sympathetic. Part of the “winnableness” of violence as a problem has been the

construction of non-Western women as sympathetic victims suffering at the hands of their inherently violent men/cultures. Women's poverty, on the other hand, has less currency because structural economic inequality has not been framed so sensationally.

Many feminist NGOs, often against their desires or interests, have become strange bedfellows with the institutions of transnational governance as they are called upon to meet the needs of their constituents. This has created divisions, hierarchies and tensions within transnational feminist movements as feminist elites within NGOs are forced to make deals and compromises. The political economy of privatization and structural adjustment by the World Bank, IMF, and other international finance organizations has meant that the traditional responsibilities of the state have been "outsourced" to NGOs (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Regulska 2000). On the other hand, NGOs are neither all the same nor static. Some operate more bureaucratically and are more beholden to donors and transnational governance than others, while others help expand civil society and strengthen democratization processes (Regulska 2000). As Alvarez (2009) suggests, some NGOs have returned to the strategy of letting movements and movement issues drive them. These NGOs remain closer to and a part of their grassroots constituencies, but can also be excluded from access to funding or other tools necessary to meet the needs of their constituents.

Discursive bedfellow to such a global political economy is the regnant Western liberal framework of "freedom," "autonomy," and "individualism." In this discourse, one is free when one is fully autonomous and independent—from patriarchy, from state welfare, from the "excesses" of one's "culture." Of course, this discourse fails to recognize that all humans depend in one form or another on other humans, their families,

cultures, and the state for various needs. NGOs and transnational feminist elites can reinforce Western liberal ideas about “freedom” by narrowing feminist demands (civil and political rights over economic security), as well as brokering deals with international financial and governmental organizations. The imbrication of transnational feminism in this hegemonic set of economic, political and cultural conditions has forced many transnational feminist theorists to ask, as Conway does:

Does the signifier “transnational feminism” denote, implicitly or explicitly, a specific cluster of practices and discourses with particular political content, carried by particular agents, reproduced through particular cultures of politics, and rooted in particular histories, but which is projecting itself as universal—a revived global sisterhood project carried by the high politics of a new, now multicultural, highly mobile, well-resourced and globally visible feminist vanguard? (Conway 2008, 211)

Like Conway, Grewal considers the ways in which “the women’s rights as human rights project universalized and stabilized the category of ‘women’” (2005, 137). Old forms of universality, thought to be discredited by transnational feminist practice, were now revived through new regimes of neoliberal governmentality. As Grewal (2005) notes, such regimes both consolidated old colonialist forms of power and produced new power-laden assumptions about the “freedom” of Western women, who could now save and rescue their “oppressed” Middle Eastern and Muslim sisters.

Mahmood (2005) extends the critique of feminism’s role in producing new universalisms, such as the meaning of freedom.

This positing of women’s agency as consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination, and the concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal, are not simply analytical oversights on the part of feminist authors. Rather, I would argue that their assumptions reflect a deeper tension within feminism attributable to its dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project. ... Thus the articulation of conditions of relative freedom that enable women both to formulate and to enact self-determined goals and interests remains the object of feminist politics and theorizing. (Mahmood 2005, 10)

This naturalized notion of freedom within feminism assumes that women's agency comes from their autonomous will in the process of resistance, thereby producing a "topography of freedom" normative to feminism (Mahmood 2005, 11). As Mahmood argues, this topography functions to violently foreclose the agency and lifeworlds of women whose actions might not follow such a feminist telos, like the Muslim women in Egypt's mosque movement Mahmood worked with. As the normative assumptions within feminism travel globally, the agency of such women, who might consolidate the patriarchal relations of their communities by adhering to its norms, is rendered illegible. How much easier, then, it becomes to rationalize the discourses of saving and rescue.

One might call the range of these discourses and assumptions, in their current iterations, a form of feminist governmentality, much in the way that Grewal (2005) indicts feminism for its contamination by the instruments of transnational governmentality. The "women's rights as human rights" discourses that have emerged in the last two decades are part of what Grewal calls the global consolidation of human rights as "a regime of truth" (2005, 121). In this regime, certain discursive understandings of "free subjects" take on moral and political authority, shored up through neoliberal governance.

[I]n countries like the United States, with patriarchal and often anti-feminist legal cultures, feminist groups did not resort to claims of human rights violations since it was assumed that they did not lack human rights; it was taken for granted, however erroneously, that the American legal system and others like it were adequate to the task of ensuring the rights of women without resorting to international instruments of the UN (Grewal 2005, 129).

This is precisely the mode of feminist governmentality that has produced women from the U.S. and other global North sites as always already rights-bearing, and women of the

global South as *a priori* rights-needing. In the post-9/11 context, feminist governmentality has come to mean the extension of colonial ideas and practices by Western feminists vis-à-vis Middle Eastern and Muslim women.

Indeed, as Grewal argues, by the end of the twentieth century, “human rights discourses evolved...as an ethic of neoliberal governance that produced subjects who saw themselves as ‘global citizens’ and ‘global feminists’” (2005, 159). As Grewal notes, even feminist groups that utilized a human rights framework, but incorporated an anti-imperialist politics, “were unable to avoid governments’ rationalizations of their practices by using discourses of diversity and pluralism” (2005, 153).

Similarly, Eisenstein argues that women’s rights discourses have become a decoy for the militarized projects of the U.S. “While using women’s rights discourse as a cover and ploy for global dominance, females like Condi Rice and Hillary Clinton articulate the newest imperial democracy that only further complicates things” (Eisenstein 2007, xii). As gender, in its discursive and embodied forms, is mobilized as a decoy and alibi for imperialism, “[imperial democracy mainstreams women’s rights discourse into foreign policy and militarizes women for imperial goals” (Eisenstein 2007, 17).

As Eisenstein and Grewal make clear, under neoliberal governmentality and imperial democracy, women’s rights discourses are captured, retooled, and utilized to prop up transnational regimes of war, neoliberalism and Western geopolitical and economic hegemony.

It is *unfortunate but unavoidable* that the “moral superiority” of American geopolitical discourse should have become part of the new global feminism in the United states (and worldwide, although for diverse agendas), constructing “American feminists as saviors and rescuers of “oppressed women” elsewhere within a “global” economy run by a few powerful states. (Grewal 2005, 152, emphasis added)

While I do not question the analyses put forward by scholars like Grewal and Eisenstein, I want to interrogate the effects such declarations of unavailability might have on the epistemic, political and affective projects of feminist activists like those in the One Million Signatures Campaign.

If, in fact, the United States has “institute[d] these new forms of governmentality that reshape the relations between the West and non-West” (Grewal 2005, 157), how do we avoid, or at least minimize, the reification of such power relations through our own scholarly and political endeavors? Might those of us committed to transnational affiliations retain the critique of neoliberal governmentality, and its mechanisms of capturing feminism through human rights instruments and transnational NGOs, while also making space for projects that might actually challenge such governmentality?

Does transnational feminist work and research inevitably reproduce the epistemic privilege of Northern/Western feminism and its imbrication in colonialist and imperialist histories? Do the dilemmas of transnational collaboration—the inherent imbalances of power, the problems of representation, the capture of feminist discourses in the service of global capitalism and war—mean that feminists should abstain from this work? Or are there modes of collaborative activism, research and transnational practices between women in disparate parts of the world that might prefigure the democratic, ethical and egalitarian world feminists are working towards?

In exploring the transnational work of the campaign, I push back against the limits of scholars like Grewal, whose analysis of feminist governmentality has been critical to my understanding of the power and possibility contained in any kind of transnational work. By considering the on-the-ground methods of a highly decentralized network, I

argue that transnational feminist praxis can be rethought in light of new political practices. The campaign network is highly intentional in its methods, working consciously against its potential contamination by feminist governmentality. What has been a profoundly useful praxis, transnational feminism, must not be relinquished because of its vulnerability to distortion by neoliberal and colonial geopolitics. Nor must it come to signal only models like NGOs and human rights regimes. Instead, transnational feminist praxis can and should be enlarged and enriched based on the actual practices of feminists making links across geographical, theoretical and strategic borders in this particular historical and political moment.

The campaign, with its horizontal network structure, rejection of ideological battles, and emphasis on broad inclusivity, offers a deeply powerful alternative to some of the bureaucratized and stratified organizational structures found in many feminist NGOs. Additionally, because the network is made up primarily of Iranians in Iran and those in the diaspora with strong connections to Iran, the campaign network has avoided many of the tensions, hierarchies and divisions befalling global NGOs. The campaign network challenges the discourses and practices of colonial and imperialist feminism by foregrounding the agency and activism of Iranian women themselves, and offers an alternative transnational praxis to that of feminist governmentality. In the next section, I show how the particular discourses and practices of the campaign can help revitalize the possibilities for transnational feminist alliances. As I've shown above, the perils of transnational feminist activism have been exacerbated by the conditions of the post-9/11 period. In what follows I argue that, however perilous, feminist affiliations might still be forged around the core principles of transnational feminist praxis.

Democratic Futures:¹¹ Revisiting Transnational Feminism

Why revisit transnational feminism? What, in particular, needs to be revisited, and in light of what changes? In this final section, I challenge the ways in which the possibilities for transnational feminist solidarity seem to be submerged under the weight of certain global forces that have proliferated beyond anyone's predictions: occupation, war, militarization, Orientalism, Islamophobia, and the rapid spread of neoliberalism. As I've shown in the previous section, this sense of foreclosure of possibility is reflected in many feminist discourses that speak to the ease with which feminism has been folded into the neoliberal and neocolonial projects of the West, most undeniably manifested in the Global War on Terror. In this geopolitical landscape, it is indeed difficult to stay hopeful about transnational feminist politics when they have too often taken the form of "saving" Middle Eastern and Muslim women from their "inherently oppressive," i.e., Muslim, cultures.

In the last decade, the deployment of feminism as an alibi for colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism has reached new levels of intensity. Concomitantly, women identifying or associated with feminism have been incorporated into positions of global governance, effectively aligning feminism with Western geopolitical hegemony.¹² Indeed, gender, sexuality and feminism have been critical to reconfiguring ideas about freedom, democracy, and citizenship. They have also been mobilized to consolidate the

¹¹ Here I borrow from Alexander and Mohanty (1997), whose *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* I consider to be a foundational text of transnational feminist praxis.

¹² Hillary Clinton is the most visible representative of this version of feminism. Even before she became a hawkish Secretary of State, her own feminist subjectivity was enabled by her global travels on behalf of "empowering" Other women. For more on Clinton, see Kaplan's (2001) essay, "Hillary Rodham Clinton's Orient: Cosmopolitan Travel and Global Feminist Subjects," and Eistenstein (2007).

civilizational discourses of modern/traditional, liberatory/patriarchal, secular democracy/ Islamic terrorist.

In light of feminism's role in Western geopolitical dominance, transnational feminist alliances constructed through justice, decolonization, and solidarity are extremely difficult to build. And yet, if feminism is an epistemic, political and affective mode that offered an alternative futurity than what we are living now, it seems essential to recuperate it from its deep contamination by global governance. As a critical inquiry and practice, transnational feminist praxis offers alternative notions of justice and democracy to those constructed through global governmentality, and builds long-term trust and affiliations through shared political struggles.

Now more than ever, a clarification of what transnational feminist praxis is, and a reanimation of its possibilities seem fundamental for not only distinguishing it from, but also challenging feminist governmentality. While I don't present a genealogy of transnational feminist theory, I try to get at the ways it has mutated from a response to crisis and a call for possible futures, to a mode of critique that effectively and affectively extinguishes actually extant and future transnational feminist praxis. By revisiting some of the foundational texts of transnational feminism, I ultimately seek to recuperate the epistemic, political, and affective registers that mark the foundational moment of transnational feminist theory through a consideration of key elements of the campaign's praxis.

In their introduction to *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Alexander and Mohanty (1997) challenge the center/periphery model found in many calls for international feminism that emerged in the 1990s. They argue that

attempts at global sisterhood not only assumed a “universal patriarchy operating in a transhistorical way,” but also failed to account for the ways in which the international and domestic are “mutually constituted” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xix). In response to failures of the global sisterhood model, Alexander and Mohanty argue for “feminist praxis in global contexts” that would move the analyses of “local, regional, and national culture to relations and processes across cultures” (1997, xix). They keep the local as an important site of analysis, but argue that it must be understood in relation to larger global processes.

This would require a corresponding shift in the conception of political organizing and mobilization across borders. The practices of democracy, justice, and equality, for example, would not be subsumed within the white, masculinist definition of the U.S. Ideas about justice would apply across cultural and national borders. The ideologies of ‘immigrants,’ ‘refugees,’ ‘guestworkers,’ and ‘citizens’ would need to be reconceived within *new definitions of justice. Our very understanding of democracy and its practices would have to become cross-cultural. In place of relativism, this critical application of feminist praxis in global contexts would substitute responsibility, accountability, engagement, and solidarity.* (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xix, emphasis added)

As this passage shows, engagement and solidarity are the guideposts for feminist work across national lines, and the potential for crafting new concepts of justice lies in this mode of working together in different, but linked locations. This praxis also incorporates a response to feminist engagement around questions of difference that reinforced cultural relativism. As feminists tried to critique gender essentialism, or the idea that there was a universal, ahistorical category of woman, and value differences among women, they often swung the pendulum too far towards cultural relativism, thereby essentializing “culture” as the root of difference.

Three years before Alexander and Mohanty published their collection, Grewal and Kaplan responded to this “mystification of non-Western cultures” by using the

concept of “scattered hegemonies” to rethink center/periphery, global/local and other binaries that recentered the West as a totalizing site of power and authority (1994, 7-10).

We use the term “transnational to problematize a purely location politics of global-local or center-periphery in favor of what Mattelart sees as the lines cutting across them. As feminists who note the absence of gender issues in all of these world-system theories, we have no choice but to challenge what we see as inadequate and inaccurate binary divisions. (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 13)

Drawing on Mattelart (1983), Grewal and Kaplan argue that transnational flows must be conceived as multidirectional, rather than flowing from West to the rest. While the West can still be understood as hegemonic, “local reception will temper and vary the effects of cultural hegemony” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 14).

As I’ve argued throughout the dissertation, this rupture of firm boundaries around local/transnational, West/non-West, secular/religious and a whole set of binaries that work to construct relations of power and hegemony is a key component of transnational feminist praxis, and reflected in the campaign network. Key to this act of rupture is the recognition that even within the context of geopolitical relations of power and hegemony, affiliations and alliances can be made through politics and shared struggle.

The construction of feminist solidarity around newly thought conceptions of justice depends on decentering the West as the site of epistemic privilege. The campaigners I interviewed articulated this desire for a conception of feminist praxis that acknowledges the cross-cultural construction of ideas and practices:

When activists from different countries sit and talk with each other, it’s a huge vote for both sides. Because I’ve seen a lot of problems for women in Iran. ... But now I see a lot of problems that are very specific to women in America. Like sexism, this objectification, all these things that we didn’t have over there. ... But if there was an opportunity we could share, I think it would bring knowledge for both sides. The way I feel that is a dynamic right now is that a women’s rights activist for America working for this country thinks she knows better about the whole world. They talk about Afghanistan, Afghan women, like they know better

what's going on over there. And I just think it's harmful for both sides because they are putting a lot of effort to work on international peace, but they look at problems at other sides of the world...and they try to apply their local solutions for it and it absolutely doesn't work. Things fall apart. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

Working against the “moral superiority” of American discourse, which authorizes Western feminism as the benefactor of “oppressed” women around the globe (Grewal 2005), the campaigners, instead, push for relations of mutuality that acknowledge shared oppressions. As this campaigner continues, opportunities for new concepts of justice created through relations of solidarity, which might actually address transnational geopolitical power, are foreclosed through this discourse of moral superiority.

Like this Feminist Majority Fund. We got the award last year, so we got to talk to a lot of activists who were primarily working on Afghanistan and that whole mentality was kind of bothering me, like why do you think you know better than them? I wish you knew, because then you would fix it! But the fact that it is ten years and you are doing the same thing and it's not working the way it should be after all of this money and time and this passion you have. I wish there was conversations between you and Afghan women about what is the solution. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

As this campaigner shows, a counter mode to feminist governmentality, which creates Western feminist subjects through their “fixing” of non-Western women, would be the recognition of shared contexts of struggle. What is shared is the reality that Western societies are also patriarchal, and that through relations of mutuality and dialogue, new practices of feminism might be built together. In this formulation, Western women are not “helping” Afghani or Iranian women, but struggling with them around shared political agendas. Moreover, expertise about what is needed in specific local contexts must come from the very actors in those contexts, not imposed or transplanted. Indeed, as this campaigner suggests, Western feminism is, in fact, a local phenomenon (im)posing (itself) as universal/transnational, and the transnational concomitantly becomes the space

for reinforcing the particular (masquerading as universal) subjectivity of Western feminists.¹³

As the campaigners I interviewed implied again and again, they clearly desire support from and alliances with Western feminists, but not if it comes at the cost of surrendering their own agency, subjectivity and specific knowledges. Working against the colonizing nature of Western feminism, which constructs Western feminist subjects through their appropriation of the struggles of non-Western women, the campaign activists repeatedly laid bare the subtle and overt mechanisms of power inhering in their engagements with feminists from the West. As Mohanty argues, colonization might signal different modes (economic, political, or cultural), but it “almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (1991, 53). By crafting their own epistemic authority through the construction of a simplified, universal and homogeneous woman, Western feminist groups like the Feminist Majority Fund enforce and reproduce the operational dynamics of colonization.

Keenly aware of and feeling the effects of the colonizing practices of Western feminism, the campaigners counter such violent maneuvers by asking Western feminists to reflect on the sexism within their own cultures, and to approach transnational feminist alliances as if they were not feminist subjects imparting authority on their oppressed objects of rescue. Indeed, as Grewal and Kaplan (1994) argue, this subject-object relation of power must be replaced by relations of solidarity in which feminists in different locations can form affiliations across shared understandings of power.

¹³ For an example of how this functions in the context of transnational labor organizing, see Ethel Brooks' *Unraveling the Garment Industry* (2007), specifically Chapter 3.

Feminist movements must be open to rethinking and self-reflexivity as an ongoing process if we are to avoid creating new orthodoxies that are exclusionary and reifying. The issue of who counts as a feminist is much less important than creating coalitions based on the practices that different women use in various locations to counter the scattered hegemonies that affect their lives. (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 18).

As many of the campaigners asserted, they desired coalitions built on the principles of self-reflexivity, mutuality and cross-cultural notions of justice. Moreover, they felt they had particular kinds of experience and knowledge that could enrich feminist understandings of power and oppression.

I think what drove me to call myself a feminist, and I told you, I think I've always been a feminist, but what drove me to call myself a feminist is sexism in America. It's always easier to, I mean I lived in Iran and sexism exists everywhere in society, culture, in our own beliefs. But you get to navigate those things, and you also separate yourself and you say, this is them, and they're stupid and I'm not going to do that. ... But then when I came to America, I mean America projects this idealized, cool, you know, image outside. So I expected America to be much cooler than it is. I'm not saying it's not cool. I love America, I love the freedoms, and in some aspects, it's very cool. But I didn't expect there to be as much sexism and I didn't expect people to accept it so easily. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

In the current (and historic) geopolitical landscape, as this activist's narrative illustrates, feminism travels only one way, from the West to the rest. As Narayan (1997) argues in the context of India and the U.S., for instance, violence against women in India is analyzed by Western feminists as a product of an essentialized patriarchal Indian culture, whereas violence against women in the U.S. is understood by those same Western feminists as an individualized phenomenon of particular men's aggression over particular women. Furthermore, Narayan asserts, there is no circuit for feminist analysis to travel the other way—in her case, from India to the U.S. In other words, imagining a scenario in which Indian feminists might construct archives of texts which analyze violence against women in the U.S. context as a cultural phenomenon, then rush to “save” American

women from their essentially patriarchal and gun-toting American men is simply untenable.

As the activist above continues, Western hegemony and cultural imperialism create vast blind spots:

And I was offended, absolutely offended, especially you see different kinds of sexism. Like I said, you learn to navigate those kinds. But you haven't learned to navigate these kinds. So when you're hanging out with a group of people, there are jokes about how shitty girls are. I mean people just joke around about horrible women are in America, and it's just completely offensive to me. People don't do that in Iran. You can't hang out with a group of boys and girls and have all of them talk shit about how women are horrible. . . . But these are things that I was very sensitive about. And there is a lot of issues with body image. So basically all that was so that I can say, I feel personally as an Iranian women, as someone living in America, there needs to be a lot of work done in some aspects. And it's not just in passing the Violence Against Women Act. There's a lot of work to be done on the culture. And I think the model that [we use] can be adopted. Feminist is a curse word in America in most circles. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

While many feminists working in the United States might agree with this campaigner, what circulates globally as feminist governmentality is precisely the opposite notion, that the U.S. is the very site of and reference for feminism. The idea that in the global south women suffer “death by culture,” while Western culture is inherently liberatory for and friendly to women, is turned on its head by this campaigner's seemingly obvious proclamation. As I argue in Chapter 2, the campaign's strategy for bringing the relatively high status of women in Iranian culture to bear on the formal legal structure unsettles the prevailing notion that Iranian culture is inherently oppressive to women. The campaigners I interviewed further destabilize this idea, and also deepen the principles of transnational feminist praxis by challenging Western feminism to unpack its own assumptions and workings of power.

Indeed, feminist praxis without this epistemic and political commitment falls easily into colonial feminism or into a flawed multi-cultural feminism that repositions the West as the center. As Alexander and Mohanty write:

In contrast to a transhistorical international feminism, [transnational feminist theorists] demonstrate that oppositional communities have their own histories of struggles, modes of theorization, and forms of organizing which shape and transform feminist practices. Our framework challenges the still firmly embedded notion of the originary status of Western feminism. It does not simply position Third-World feminism as a reaction to gaps in Western feminism; it does not summon Third-World feminism in the service of (white) Western feminism's intellectual and political projects. Instead, it provides a position from which to argue for a comparative, relational feminist praxis that is transnational in its response to and engagement with global processes of colonization. (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xx)

Indeed, it is precisely this “comparative, relational feminist praxis” that the campaigners are trying to elaborate as they engage with Western feminism.

Still, their agency and subjectivity, and the particular knowledge they bring to transnational feminist praxis, are often overlooked as they negotiate cross-cultural spaces within circuits of transnational feminist governmentality.

I tremendously [*sic*] learned a lot from this culture. I feel I'd like to share the things that are missing here and I had at home, but there is no opportunity for that. It's like what we have here is the best. It's just unfortunate. I'm not angry, I just feel sorry. Where is this coming from? (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

This campaigner's denial of anger does not detract from what she experiences as a foreclosure of the particular knowledge she has accumulated through different locations of struggle. This mode of epistemic silencing works to incorporate non-Western feminists only insofar as they are objects of Western feminist projects. What the campaigners speak to is the sense in which their own feminist subjectivities are erased through collaborations

with Western feminists. Another campaigner echoes this frustration, and points to alternative transnational feminist practices:

You know when you speak to American feminists, and I know they've been trying very hard to get over that, some of the attitudes, but *you always have to remind them that we're working on something together*. You're giving us an award, and *we're giving you the opportunity to look at this amazing thing, ingenious thing, that they did in Iran and learn from it and try and do it in your own country*. You know, I think, I've genuinely felt like some of the things that the campaign has done are things that people should adopt in other parts of the world, and not just the Middle East. I'm talking about America and European countries. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009, emphases added)

Challenging the “originary status of Western feminism” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xx), the campaign activists seek the kinds engagements that enable their particular experiences and knowledges to inform and shape the larger field of transnational feminist politics. As this activist goes on:

And again I think this is a power thing. ... So it's complicated. It really is kind of a person by person basis. Maybe organizations are different. But yes, that exists, that balancing act exists. To remind people that, you're not coming and saying, good job (patronizing voice). It's not like that. Get that condescending attitude out. ... *I think that these activists that are working under really difficult conditions in Iran, when you think about them as individual feminists, I think they have a lot to offer*. This idea of saying, American feminist and Iranian feminist, you always think the Iranian feminist's a little more behind and understands less about things, and sees less of the complexities. It's not true. I think that's what the challenges are when we're dealing with American feminists. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009, emphases added)

By enacting their own agency and subjectivity through discourses of decolonization and solidarity, the campaigners are practicing and enriching transnational feminist praxis. By positioning themselves in relations of mutuality and exchange *with*, instead of objects *of*, Western feminism, the campaigners articulate their own histories of struggle and the particular methods that have emerged in their contexts as the basis for solidarity with other feminists.

In emphasizing and reflecting on the campaign's horizontal and democratic practice, the campaigners position themselves as agents in the shaping of transnational feminist politics. Using the notion of "reproducibility" as the campaign's distinct method, one campaigner asserts:

I was very impressed, the way that this campaign was defined. Non-hierarchy worked. And mainly because it has a small, well-defined structure, and then because it doesn't have hierarchy, it can be reproduced very well, very quickly. I really enjoy the freedoms that each person has and how they go after in their own activism and I think that I haven't seen that in America, haven't seen that in feminist activism in America. Maybe you can see it in the blogosphere, that kind of non-hierarchical activism. It really empowers you to be creative and to take initiative and feel like you're part of something, and that makes you feel strong. And it helps things spread very quickly. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

Interestingly, this activist argues that the campaign's method or practice could be a model for American feminist politics, stating that she hasn't seen this same level of democratic participation in shaping American culture by American feminists. She continues:

So if something like that happens in America, that can be reproduced like that, and I like the non-hierarchical structure and the network structure because it helps the reproducibility of it. And people, it really empowers people, I think. Rather than just, I mean if there's absolutely no structure, or I shouldn't say structure, if it's not well defined, it becomes very difficult. But at least if some sort of skeleton is defined and if people can add their own thing to it, it's amazing and I think it can be spread, and people can adopt that, basically bring feminist issues into the mainstream. I would *love* to see that in America. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

While this interviewee may be overstating the uniqueness of the campaign, what interests me is her and other interviewees' particular claims to the campaign as a model for other feminists, and the ways in which these claims disrupt ideas about how transnational flows operate. The hegemonic discourses of "core to periphery" or "West to rest" are troubled by the observations that my interviewees offered. As Iranians growing up in Iran, but with some adult experience in the U.S., many interviewees spoke of the sexism of U.S.

culture, in particular the exploitative focus on women's bodies and everyday discourses revealing the ways in which American culture *needs* feminism.

As transnational activists with particular experiences and knowledges, and situated in multiple locations, the campaigners have created a “comparative, relational feminist praxis” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xx) that works to decolonize feminism and build new collaborative constructions of justice. Additionally, they work to historicize their contexts of struggle, challenging the incredible misinformation about Iranian women.

The first thing I have to do when I speak with Americans, I have to bring them back to what reality is in Iran. Because people usually think that it's worse than it actually is. So I've had a lot of conversations where people think that all women, you know, have circumcision in Iran, or women can't go to school, like education is much worse than it is. So I always have to put it in context and say, listen, ... the first woman who became a surgeon in Iran was from the generation of my grandmother. But then that same woman right now who can be operating on your eye could be an eye surgeon and cutting you up, her testimony is considered half of a man's. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

This activist speaks to the strategy of the campaign, which I elaborated in Chapter 2, in bringing the relatively high status of Iranian women in terms of their education, literacy and political participation to bear on the discriminatory legal structure. In grounding her discourses in historical nuance and complexity, this activist, like other campaigners, works against a static and ahistoric notion of women's lives in Iran. Additionally, she offers a praxis of connection and solidarity through the recognition of women's contradictory status in the U.S as well:

So there are all these contradictions, and there are contradictions in America as well. You see that here too, but it's just more invisible when you're part of it. You don't see it as so shocking, so weird. But you do see it in other cultures, so I have to say that. ... I thought always that the best way to talk about women's rights in Iran is to talk about women's rights activists. Because it shows strength and it acknowledges that there are problems, but women aren't just sitting there for you

to go save them, for us to go save them. (interview with a campaigner, October 24, 2009)

In their work to build support for the campaign, activists construct notions of feminist solidarity around women's shared experiences of sexism, recognizing that sexism operates differently in different contexts. Radically interrupting the colonial discourses of rescue and saving, the campaigners I interviewed point to the ways that the campaign's network, like other transnational networks originating in the global South, has much to offer the global women's movement.

At its foundational moment, transnational feminist praxis offered notions of liberation that were mutually constructed by feminists working across borders, and sought to revision democracy and justice from the very practices of decolonization. New practices of democracy that were constituted by relations of solidarity challenged many binaries and borders, geographical, political, ideological and otherwise. As the particular discourses, strategies and methods of the campaign show, transnational feminist affiliations are still possible, even against the backdrop of war, neoliberalism and feminist governmentality. If the "colonizing nature of research as well as the colonizing nature of globalization" (Bahkru 2008, 202) also mark and contaminate the space of the transnational, feminists working for social justice within politics and scholarship face enormous challenges. It is all the more imperative, then, that transnational feminist praxis not be additionally distorted by claims of its impossibility.

Conclusion

The transnational networks of the campaign point to the emergence of feminist movements enabled by new spaces, including those facilitated by cyber culture, that

interrupt geographic and conceptual boundaries, and provide new frameworks for thinking about global feminism. The campaign provides significant insight into how the new organizing modes emerging from Iranians and their diasporic counterparts connected through cyber culture enable transnational political networks to develop, thereby affecting how local political cultures coalesce—and vice versa.

This chapter has demonstrated that, insofar as Iranian feminists in the diaspora engage the transnational sphere, they not only draw from dominant transnational discourses but also intervene in and redefine such discourses. I contest the uni-directional application of transnational feminist theory to non-Western actors. Unfortunately, despite concerted effort to the contrary, transnational feminist studies often reproduce the very “West to the rest,” or local-South/global-North frameworks they seek to critique. Instead I have shown how transnational actors can disrupt and reframe the putative opposition between the West and Iran, democracy and Islam, secularism and religion, liberatory Western feminism and non-Western women’s victimhood.

I have examined the various burdens and possibilities placed on diasporic Iranian feminist activists as they grapple with the importance of their location, and the ways in which they can help and hurt the campaign in Iran. I consider how they navigate certain iterations of global feminism that leave them vulnerable to accusations of them as either “puppets” or “darlings” of the West. In this sense, the campaign network is profoundly effective: its commitments to inclusive, non-ideological and democratic practices enable deep participation from those involved; its use of new technologies facilitates its transnational ties; and it successfully negotiates the dilemmas of working transnationally in an age of war, feminist governmentality, neoliberalism and Islamophobia. The

campaign neither subsumes local politics to the demands of global paradigms, nor reinscribes ideas about innate “cultural” differences.

The work of the campaign network also builds a certain affective politics, particularly a profound engagement with hope. The affective turn in feminist theory has helped illuminate the ways that emotional and more mysterious lifeworlds that are deeply present in intellectual, political, and everyday being.¹⁴ And yet not enough has been written about the ways that activist work against tremendous odds is, among other things, a deep engagement with and effort to sustain hope. In the case of Iranian politics, the space of hope is critical not just to activists on the ground, but to the intellectual and political project of creating knowledge about Iran and Iranians, and the ways in which that knowledge circulates and affects different political possibilities and outcomes.

All too often, Iran has been framed as the space where change is impossible, both by parts of the Iranian diaspora, cynically removed from the complex everyday life of Iranians inside Iran, as my interviewees pointed out, and by both conservative and progressive sectors of the West who seek different kinds of dangerous interventions “on behalf” of the Iranian people. The successes of the campaign so far, as shown in this and the previous chapter, and the work of the campaign’s transnational network show that change is not only possible, but is happening in dynamic, complex and ongoing ways. Transnational feminist politics, as exemplified by the campaign network and its practices of solidarity, have generated important new discourses, strategies, ideas, and spaces, including the constitutive praxis of hope. A praxis of hope and possibility is critical not just to activists on the ground, but to the epistemic project of Iranian feminism, and the

¹⁴ See, for instance, Ahmed (2004), Clough (2007), Massumi (2002), Puar (2007), and Sedgwick (1993).

ways in which that project circulates and affects different political possibilities and outcomes.

Hope and despair—like campaigns, discourses, politics and bodies—travel, and in their circulations, they do certain kinds of work. Drawing on and extending the idea of “living proof” which Brooks (2007) lays out as a methodological, epistemological, and political orientation, I argue that the living proof of these activists’ lives offers a praxis of hope that might affect the very shape of our collective future. Brooks writes:

Proof, as such, can be seen in scars, in subject positions—and in women’s testimonies to their experience. In protests against sweatshops, as in those against war, it is a political act to offer one’s story and one’s body as living proof. Drawing from Jelisaveta Blagojevic’s work on love, in which she discusses the possibilities of offering love in philosophy as disrupting the maintenance of difference, I argue that women’s testimony, women’s witnessing, and women’s telling of their histories are acts of love that disrupt the maintenance of difference. (Brooks 2007, 141-142).

How do the stories, ideas, reflections, and experiences of the activists in the One Million Signatures Campaign “disrupt the maintenance of difference” that functions through the structuring apparatuses of war, neoliberalism and feminist governmentality? How does the transnational feminist subjectivity constructed by the activists through their political locations, strategies, claims and commitments gesture toward a different future than that offered by the regimes of truth that have become so hegemonic?

I have sought here to theorize hope as that which is produced by, and also might construct, a different kind of feminist practice than feminist governmentality. In so doing, I have attempted to show both the ways in which a politics of hope and possibility is generated by and transmitted through the everyday practices of Iranian activists on the ground, and the importance of considering such politics through the framework of transnational feminist theory and practice. In the next chapter, I continue down this line

of inquiry and analysis through an exploration of the work of Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muslim feminist, and human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi. As a founding signatory of the One Million Signatures Campaign, a tireless feminist activist, and a transnational figure of Islamic feminism, Ebadi has produced important discourses that challenge Western hegemony over Iran and the modes of feminist governmentality that consolidate such hegemony. I look at the particular ways her discourses reflect and amplify the circulation of Islamic feminist discourses in the transnational sphere, and reflect on the reception of her particular politics in relation to the transnational reception of other Iranian feminists. In considering the ways in which Ebadi interrupts the Orientalist “native informant” genre, I position her work as part of the political claim staking of Iranian feminists on their own terms.

Chapter 4

“Those of Us Who Stayed:” The Transnational Activism of Shirin Ebadi

Islam is a religion whose first sermon to the Prophet begins with the word "Recite!" The Koran swears by the pen and what it writes. Such a sermon and message cannot be in conflict with awareness, knowledge, wisdom, freedom of opinion and expression and cultural pluralism.

—Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Lecture

Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian Muslim feminist who won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2003, has been a supporter of and active participant in the One Million Signatures Campaign. Even before the campaign, Ebadi has long been a spokesperson for the compatibility of human rights within Islam, and an exemplar of Islamic feminism. This chapter explores the meanings of Ebadi’s Nobel Peace Prize award, arguing that like the campaign, Ebadi’s discourses of Islamic human rights disrupt hegemonic framings of Islam and human rights as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable discourses.

In this chapter, I consider the ways in which Ebadi consistently positions herself as part of an Iran that is, in Homa Hoodfar’s words, “democratizing from the inside out” (2009, 60). Reflecting on how Ebadi’s feminist discourses have circulated both within Iran and beyond, I show that they provide an alternative understanding of “Muslim” and “feminist” by working against problematic tropes that frame Islam and Iran as anti-feminist. I argue that Ebadi’s discourses and activist practices are part of a vibrant Iranian feminist movement that draws on transnational cyber, print and activist networks to help legitimize its grass-roots, bottom-up and indigenous character. As an emblem of Muslim

feminism emanating from within Iran, and as someone who has received vast transnational recognition, Ebadi represents a transnational feminist alternative to patriarchal Islam.

I also do a close reading of Ebadi's memoir, *Iran Awakening* (2007). I consider the ways in which Ebadi rejects the choice of exile and departure as the only conditions of possibility for her feminism and human rights activism. It is Ebadi's commitment to staying and working in Iran that demands the possibility of democracy from within, refusing both the impossibility of such democracy and subsequent exile. I researched and wrote most of this chapter before Ebadi was forcibly exiled after her human rights activism in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections. Yet, her exile was not chosen, but forced, and her memoir still represents a significant departure from those that focus on exile as the only possibility for Iranian feminists. In the last decade, there has been a proliferation of accounts of exile and departure from Iran, written primarily by women. Most of these construct Iran as an ultimate space of capture and imprisonment, and the U.S. or other Western countries as absolute sites of liberation. Ebadi works against this framing by insisting on living and working in Iran. She consistently argues that Iran is transforming from within through the strategies and discourses of Islamic reformers, and shifting social and cultural practices around gender equality. In speaking to Western audiences, Ebadi offers a powerful counter-narrative to those which foreclose Iranian and Muslim women's agency.

Considering Ebadi's memoir alongside of my analysis of the One Million Signatures Campaign, I argue along two important lines: one, that Iranian feminists are creating new transnational political cultures through their textual—both cyber and print—

practices, and two, that through critical transnational feminist reading practices, we can situate Ebadi's memoir as a testimony of resistance to Western hegemony, imperialism and Orientalist tropes. Drawing on Lata Mani's theorization of the transnational politics of location and reception, I argue for the possibility of multiple or "discrepant" (1990) readings of Ebadi and foreground a reading practice that is both counter-hegemonic and decolonizing.

Profiling Islamic Feminism: Shirin Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize Award

In October 2003, the news that the Nobel Peace Prize would be awarded to not just a woman, not just an Iranian, not just a Muslim, but someone who embodies all three identities, hit the international community like a lightning rod. Iran was in the news again, not as one of the monstrous triplets of the "axis of evil," but as the face of a democratic, just Islam. This Islam argues for women's rights, promotes individual freedoms, and supports a democratic, civil society.

It was fitting that a Muslim woman and human rights lawyer grabbed the award, given, as I have shown in previous chapters, the enormous contributions of Islamic feminists to the reform movement. If Iranian women had for so long been the targets of gross misrepresentations and violent foreclosures of their agency, Ebadi's win represented a shift in representational politics vis-à-vis Iranian women. Ebadi's award signaled that Iran is a complex political space with a vibrant feminist movement, which includes the discourses and practices of Islamic feminists.¹

¹ In making this point, I am also mindful of the ways in which new forms of visibility and representation can work to consolidate neocolonial and Orientalist discourses. For instance, in the post-election Green movement in Iran, women became the "face" of the opposition in popular media accounts. On the one hand, if contextualized, this visibility can function to edify readers/viewers of women's long history of

According to Mahmood Monshipouri (2004), Ebadi earned her law degree in 1969 from University of Tehran and became Iran's first female judge. When the revolutionary government barred women from being judges, Ebadi was forced out of her job. Despite these actions, Ebadi has remained highly visible and outspoken activist for women's and children's human rights. In 1994, she helped establish an NGO, Society for Protecting the Rights of Children, and has litigated many high-profile cases involving human rights abuses. As Monshipouri notes, in 2000 Ebadi was arrested and jailed, along with lawyer Hojjatoleslam Mohsen Rahami, in connection with a case in which members of the establishment were alleged to have been involved in activities of the Partisans of the Party of God (*Ansar-e Hezbollah*), including the attempted murder of Hajjatoleslam Abdolla Nouri, former vice president and critic of the regime's conservative clerics (Monshipouri 2004, 5-6).

Her Nobel Prize in 2003 was, in part, a culmination of her life's work as an activist for women's and children's rights and a Muslim feminist reformer. As the *BBC World News* reported: "Married with two grown-up daughters, she is credited with being a driving force behind the reform of family laws in Iran by seeking changes in divorce and inheritance legislation" (*BBC World News* 2003). Ebadi's win marked the achievement of Iranian feminists in pushing the reform movement onto the world stage. As with the campaign activists discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Ebadi's work in reforming family law fits with what Mahdi (2003) calls women's post-revolutionary activism. Skeptical of nationalist movements which always compromise women's needs, activists

political engagement. But without context, the hyper-visibility of Iranian women in the Green movement often functioned to pit "good" (modern/women) citizens against "evil" (Islamist/male) states.

have turned towards balancing individual and collective rights within national reforms such as the signatures campaign. As Ebadi told Amir Taheri from the *Weekly Standard*:

I think the era of revolutions has ended. Also, there is no guarantee that another revolution would provide something better than the one we had 24 years ago. After years of reflection I have come to the conclusion that revolutions never deliver what they promise. What I am working for is a reform movement in all walks of life, political, social, cultural, and of course, individual rights. (Taheri 2003)

In reflecting Mahdi's understanding of women's post-revolutionary activism, Ebadi's discourse also echoes the pragmatist reformist discourse elaborated in chapters 2 and 3, and the grassroots, (re)conciliatory approach to holding the state accountable the One Million Signatures Campaign utilizes, both of which signal the post-Islamist turn in Middle Eastern political movements (Bayat 2007).

Ebadi capitalized on her award, using multiple opportunities to assert that Islam and human rights are compatible, to solicit support from the international community for the Iranian reform movement and to profile feminism within an Islamic framework. In her Nobel Lecture,² Ebadi asserted:

The discriminatory plight of women in Islamic states, too, whether in the sphere of civil law or in the realm of social, political and cultural justice, has its roots in the patriarchal and male-dominated culture prevailing in these societies, not in Islam. This culture does not tolerate freedom and democracy, just as it does not believe in the equal rights of men and women, and the liberation of women from male domination (fathers, husbands, brothers ...), because it would threaten the historical and traditional position of the rulers and guardians of that culture. (Ebadi 2003)

In disaggregating patriarchy from Islam, Ebadi distinguishes between patriarchal practices that serve to maintain male authority and control, and Islam, a discourse and practice that offers and can accommodate principles of social justice. In a news report from the transnational feminist organization, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Ebadi

² See Appendix B for Ebadi's full Nobel Lecture.

asserts: “My problem is not with Islam, it is with the culture of patriarchy. For twenty years I have been putting out the message that it is possible to be Muslim and have laws that respect human rights. Islam is not incompatible with human rights and all Muslims should be glad about this prize” (Women Living Under Muslim Laws 2003). Identifying patriarchy rather than Islam as the source of women’s oppression, Ebadi disrupts the metonymic collapsing of Islam and patriarchy so prevalent in Orientalist discourse. By pointing to a culture of patriarchy, Ebadi locates women’s oppression within a structure that is neither inherent in, nor a product of, Islam.

In arguing against the abuse of political power in the name of religion, Ebadi offers an alternative framework to the notion of the Iranian state as a static theocracy, incapable of changing because of some repressive apparatus inherent to religion. In the *Weekly Standard* interview, she claims:

What we have in Iran is not a religious regime, but a regime in which those in power use religion as a means of staying in power. If the present regime does not reform and evolve into one that reflects the will of the people, it is going to fail, even if it adopts a secularist posture. ... It is true that human rights are violated in most Muslim countries. But this is a political, not a religious, reality. We have had all sorts of regimes in Muslim countries, including secularists, Marxists, and nationalists. They, too, violated human rights. If corrupt and brutal regimes oppress their people, in what way is this a sign of Islam’s incompatibility with human rights? (Taheri 2003)

Ebadi’s discourse underscores three key ideas also found in the discourses of the One Million Signatures Campaign: a critique of state power as political, not religious, oppression; the inevitability of social change coming from the majority of Iranian citizens and the necessity of the state to reflect its citizens’ desires; and the compatibility of Islam and human rights.

Implicit in these ideas is a critique of the hegemony of secularism. As Talal Asad (1993) argues, the project of liberal secularism was to authorize itself as the rational counterpart to what it framed as the inherent fanaticism of religion. Asad writes:

Perhaps the feeling that secular arguments are rationally superior to religious ones is based on the belief that religious convictions are the more rigid. But there is no decisive evidence for thinking this. Religious traditions have undergone the most radical transformations over time. Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretation are endless ... Fanatics come in all shapes and sizes among skeptics and believers alike—as do individuals of a tolerant disposition. As for the claim that among the religious, coercion replaces persuasive argument, it should not be forgotten that we owe the most terrible examples of coercion in modern times to secular totalitarian regimes—Nazism and Stalinism. (Asad 2003, 236)

Muslim feminists like Ebadi radically challenge the hegemony of secularism and disaggregate political repression from religion per se. In claiming Islam as the framework within which a just and egalitarian vision of gender can take root, Ebadi works against Orientalist framings of Islam and Iran as inherently patriarchal.

Ebadi also echoes the strategies of Islamic feminists engaging *ijtihad* and the New Religious Thinking explored in chapters 1 and 2. In *Al Jazeera*, Ebadi states: “The legal keys that Shia religion has given us enable us to transform and act according to the times” (*Al Jazeera* 2003). Here Ebadi points to the interpretive tradition many women have been engaging with in Iran since the 1990s, both at the formal literary level and at the level of more informal everyday discourses. Paralleling key reform clerics who work with the campaign, Ebadi makes a claim for human understanding of Islamic text to accommodate the present historical context in which it is read, and locates the alternative to patriarchal codifications of Islam within Islam itself. In an interview with Jacqueline Massey in *Herizons*, Ebadi argues:

I firmly believe that what has caused the backwardness in Iran for women is erroneous interpretations of Islam. As an example, when we protest and say, ‘Why should men be allowed to take four wives?’ they say, ‘Because this is the dictate of Islam.’ So the answer would have to come out from the heart of Islam. And we should prove that Islam can be interpreted in another way. (Massey 2004)

Using Islamic feminist discourses, Ebadi positions her feminism from within the parameters of Islam, parameters set by the Islamization processes in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. But as with the campaign, it is precisely these parameters that have enabled an alternative discourse, one that embraces women’s equality, to emerge from the very “heart of Islam.”

Iranians responded to Ebadi’s Nobel Prize win with the hallmark enthusiasm that had heretofore marked other positive points of entry into the international spotlight for Iran.³ As Ziba Mir-Hosseini documented in *Middle East Report*, thousands from civil society Iran welcomed Ebadi on October 14, 2003 on her return from Europe, including relatives of then President Khatami and every female member of the Parliament. Mir-Hosseini argues that Ebadi’s win gave a much needed boost to the reform movement in Iran (Mir-Hosseini 2003). Similarly, Elaheh Koulaee, a reformist MP at the time, claimed that Ebadi’s win “shows the world that the democracy process in Iran is going forward” (Koulaee 2003).

Ordinary Iranians, too, sounded reformists’ hopes while engaging in lively discussions about the meaning of Ebadi’s win. Reflecting a desire for the international community to recognize Iran’s internal struggle for democratization, Iranians pointed to Ebadi’s social location as an Iranian, a Muslim and a woman. In a popular Muslim online magazine, “Muslim Wakeup!,” Omid Safi wrote:

³ Examples include Khatami’s presidential wins in 1997 and 2001, and Iran’s defeat of the U.S. in World Cup Soccer in 1998.

This is huge. Is there a good way of talking about earthquakes and aftershocks? That might give you a sense of the impact of this award will have on the global Muslim community. It is going to inspire the silent majority of Muslims worldwide who simply want to live lives of quiet dignity. ... And how I relish the fact that this Muslim recipient is a woman, a strong mother of two children, a judge, and an activist. How many stereotypes about being a Muslim and a woman, an Iranian and a woman, she shatters through the grace of her being! (Safi 2003)

Similarly, Syma Sayyah, in *Payvand Iran News*, reported that the crowd greeting Ebadi shouted slogans like “Long Live Iranian Women, Long Live Shirin Ebadi” and “Dearest Ebadi, Hope of Iran” (2003), highlighting the role of women in the reform movement.

Ebadi’s Nobel Prize award consolidated transnational recognition of Islamic feminist praxis and the internal struggle for reforms taking place in Iran. Through her discursive responses to the award, Ebadi shot through other transnational discourses that stage Islam and feminism in opposition to each other, as mutually exclusive and antagonistic forces, and challenged her critics from within and outside Iran. Embedded in Ebadi’s responses to her award, as well as those of Iranians inside Iran, was an implicit critique of the hegemony of secular-liberal notions of democracy and modern citizenship, and an explicit call to the Iranian state to fully actualize the demands and desires of Iran’s huge reform movement.

Furthermore, Ebadi used her prize to challenge the justification of human rights abuses by the Iranian state vis-à-vis putative anti-imperialist discourses, as well as the justification of human right abuses by Western powers in the name of “security.” In her Nobel Lecture, she claims:

The concerns of human rights' advocates increase when they observe that international human rights laws are breached not only by their recognized opponents under the pretext of cultural relativity, but that these principles are also violated in Western democracies, in other words countries which were themselves among the initial codifiers of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is in this framework that, for months, hundreds

of individuals who were arrested in the course of military conflicts have been imprisoned in Guantanamo, without the benefit of the rights stipulated under the international Geneva conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the [United Nations] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. (Ebadi 2003)

By linking human rights abuses in two different, but similarly repressive states, Ebadi critiques human rights regimes which locate human rights violations within “religious cultures,” yet are silent about such violations in putative liberal democracies.

In challenging the civilizational discourses emerging in the post-9/11 period, and in holding both the Iranian state and the U.S. government accountable, Ebadi draws out the similarities between the repressive actions of Iran and the U.S. In so doing, she echoes the strategies of the One Million Signatures Campaign in carving out a discourse that is simultaneously anti-war and anti-interventionist, and critical of the Iranian state’s internal repression. Like the campaigners, Ebadi resists the poverty of choices put forward in response to U.S.-Iran relations: one, a cultural relativist “anti-imperialist” politics (defending the Iranian state against the West), and the other, an interventionist politics (“protecting” the Iranian people from their government). Instead, throughout her lecture, Ebadi puts forward an alternative politics, one which insists on transnational support for all “nations’ right to determine their own destinies” (Ebadi 2003).

As Ebadi (2007) notes in her memoir, *Iran Awakening*, the award drew attention to her lifelong work of reforming Iran from within an Islamic feminist framework:

In the last twenty-three years, from the day I was stripped of my judgeship to the years doing battle in the revolutionary courts of Tehran, I had repeated one refrain: an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with equality and democracy is an authentic expression of faith. It is not religion that binds women, but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered. That belief, along with the conviction that change in Iran must come peacefully and from within, has underpinned my work (Ebadi 2007, 204).

In all her writings, Ebadi insists on the possibility of change from within Iran and from within the social justice vision inhering in Islam. As she continues here, this praxis resonated with ordinary Iranian citizens, even if it drew criticism from some local and international sectors. Ebadi consistently holds accountable the conservative forces inside Iran that seek to discredit her, but also the secular fundamentalists outside Iran who position Islam in opposition to democracy.

I have been under attack most of my adult life for this approach, threatened by those in Iran who denounce me as an apostate for daring to suggest that Islam can look forward and denounced outside my country by secular critics of the Islamic Republic, whose attitudes are no less dogmatic. Over the years, I have endured all manner of slights and attacks, been told that I must not appreciate or grasp the real spirit of democracy if I can claim in the same breath that freedom and human rights are not perforce in conflict with Islam. When I heard the statement of the prize read aloud, heard my religion mentioned specifically alongside my work defending Iranians' rights, I knew at that moment what was being recognized: the belief in a positive interpretation of Islam, and the power of that belief to aid Iranians who aspire to peacefully transform their country (Ebadi 2007, 204).

As an activist using Islamic feminist praxis, Ebadi contributes to the expansion or reintellectualization (Eickelman and Anderson 2003) of Islamic discourses. In her various texts and travels, Ebadi, like the campaign activists in Iran and the diaspora, also expands and reanimates transnational feminism. By critiquing state power and linking the human rights struggles within Iran to those in the U.S. and West, Ebadi destabilizes Western hegemony over Iran and articulates a powerful discourse of decolonization.

While transnational recognition of activists in the age of neoliberalism and empire can often undermine local struggles (as I show in chapter 3 and discuss below), there is no question that Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize helped boost reform efforts (and spirits) in Iran, and legitimize Islamic feminism within transnational spaces. As I argue in the next section, Ebadi's deep commitment to working for pragmatic feminist reform from within

Iran enacts an important challenge to the regnant notion of Iran and the Iranian state as *a priori* resistant to change. The construction of Iran as an inherently repressive and static space, resistant to change, comes from many sources, some of which I addressed in Chapter 3. Below I consider the ways in which the genre of Iranian women's memoirs of the last decade, falling on already suspecting Western ears, reinforces this hegemonic narrative. I read Ebadi against this genre, arguing that she produces a critical counterhegemonic narrative of Iran as a site of hope and possibility.

Iran (and Islam) as Prison

In her refusal to choose exile and flight from Iran, Ebadi works against the pervasive notion, produced by a host of Iranian women's memoirs, of Iran as a place always already foreclosing women's agency. The mere review of titles suggests that for Iranian women, living in Iran is equivalent to being held captive, imprisoned, and in flight: *Between Two Worlds: My Life and Captivity in Iran* (Saber 2010); *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (Hakakian 2005); *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran* (Esfariandi 2009); *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (Latifi 2005); and *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir* (Nemat 2007). While the production of Iran as captor is deeply troubling, what is equally problematic in these memoirs is the production of the West as the site of freedom, as that which releases one from captivity. The state of captivity is only resolved with leaving or fleeing for another (Western) society. This is evident in some of the titles above and also in memoirs whose titles constitute the West as the modern antidote to anti-modern Iran, including the best known, *Reading Lolita in*

Tehran: A Memoir in Books (Nafisi 2003). While the memoirs themselves contain nuances and complexities, overall they work to produce and secure representations of Iran as antithetical to freedom, as that which holds one captive, and the West as the liberator.

Excellent work critiquing many contemporary Iranian women's memoirs has already been produced by scholars (Keshavarz 2007; Mahmood 2008; Rastegar 2006). Rastegar analyzes the ways in which Azar Nafisi's critically acclaimed and hugely popular *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reframes the Orientalist narrative "into one of promodern Iranians versus antimodern Iranians" (2006, 108). She argues that the "representation of women as victims of state violence in Iran becomes a key component of asserting this binary" (2006, 108), as Nafisi's putative modern women students seek out the "democratic ethos that she argues is implicit in the (Western) novel" (2006, 108), while religious men seek to imprison them in a putative anti-modern "mythical Islam" (2006, 108-9). As audiences in the West, for whom they were produced, read these memoirs in the post-9/11 climate, their suspicions about Iran and Iranian culture as an enormous prison for women are confirmed. Indeed it is Islam, staged as inherently patriarchal and inflexible, that is the very imprisoning force in many of these interpretations.

The reception of Nafisi's memoir to critical acclaim and bestseller status in the West⁴ confirms the ease with which audiences outside of Iran ingest such neo-Orientalist tales of anti-modern Islam versus democratic West. Indeed, Nafisi is the spoonful of

⁴ As Rastegar notes, "As of October 2005, the memoir had sold more than nine hundred thousand copies in the United States (*National Sales*) and was approaching its second year on the *New York Times* best sellers list ("Paperback Best Sellers," 2005)" (2006,109).

sugar that helps the medicine go down, as she eloquently presents herself as an authority.

As Rastegar asserts:

Ultimately, it is the story that Nafisi tells, and reviewers' interpretation of that story, that legitimates the work as an "authentic" and "representative" view of postrevolutionary Iran. It is a story that rings true to the ears of its readers, posing few challenges to their preconceived notions and allowing them to maintain their flexible superiority as Westerners. Despite ambivalence about Nafisi's own "authenticity" as a "representative" Iranian woman, her representation of *other* women and their interests and desires is read as "authentic," as is her account of the appropriate solutions (Rastegar 2006, 111).

Indeed, Nafisi functions as the native informant whose seal of authenticity affirms and confirms widely circulating discourses about Iran, Islam and women.

Mahmood (2008) details the ways in which Muslim women's memoirs in the post-9/11 context reproduce the colonial narrative about Muslim societies as victimizers of women, but with a new lethality. Mahmood writes:

The popularity and ideological force of this literature owes largely to the ability of the Muslim woman author to embody the double figure of insider and victim, a key subject within Orientalist understandings of women in Muslim societies. These autobiographical works are, however, also distinct from earlier colonial accounts in which it fell to Europeans to reveal the suffering of indigenous women oppressed by the primitive practices of colonized cultures. Here it is the "indigenous woman" herself who provides the ethnographic grist for this bloodied imagination, lending a voice of authenticity to the old narrative that a liberal ear, raised on a critique of colonial literature, can more easily hear and digest (Mahmood 2008, 84).

Mahmood considers Nafisi's (2003) memoir alongside of Irshad Manji's *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, Carmen bin Laden's *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia*, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, and other lesser known works by Muslim women. What is particularly troubling about this genre, as Mahmood argues, is both the native informant status they take on as they circulate in this period, but also the

ways in which they present themselves and are received as representatives of feminist literature. As Mahmood notes, Nafisi's book received warm praise from feminist writers, who appear "blind...to the larger political projects [such memoirs] facilitate" (2008, 95).

The main political project to which Mahmood speaks is the refashioning, potentially through its eradication, of Islam. This is a project distinct from feminist and other reform movements that seek changes from *within* Islamic contexts. Rather, this is a project of Western hegemony and its material and discursive arms, from occupation to war to secular-liberal discourses about Islam as static, irrational, anti-modern and inherently patriarchal. Mahmood urges "feminist writers and cultural critics" to "learn to read such texts more critically, a reading that must ground itself in a familiarity with the complexities and ambiguities that attend even the much-spurned Iranian clerical regime and the politics of dissent it has spawned" (2008, 95). Feminist writers, cultural critics, students, and everyday readers have devoured Nafisi. For several years, her book was the sole explanatory referent to Iran for a whole range of people, familiar and not so familiar to me, who enquired about my dissertation.

The "intellectual exhaustion" (Mahmood 2008, 81) these encounters produce is overwhelming. Yet, anyone engaged in producing knowledge about Iran or Islam must contend with such fraught terrain and help people find other kinds of narratives. My examination of Ebadi is about amplifying another kind of narrative, one that interrupts the voice of the native informant to signal the possibility of working and living in Iran (as opposed to fleeing it for the West) as the very condition for feminist agency. In this move, I do not offer Ebadi as a "more authentic" voice of Iranian women than Nafisi or anyone else. What I do argue is that Ebadi articulates the possibility of change from

within Iran in ways that line up with other reformist discourses. As a key player in the feminist and reform movements, she reflects a very different political project than that of other transnational figures.

Refusing the Trope of “The Native Informant”

In reading Ebadi against the neo-Orientalist women’s memoir genre, I do not mean to position her as some sort of decontextualized, ahistoric, alternative “authentic” voice to the neo-Orientalist memoirs of our day. Ebadi, too, wrote her memoir for Western readers and so, too, entered the messy landscape of transnational reading and reception practices that can produce undesired effects. But as the passage I quoted previously from her memoir shows, Ebadi’s aim is to challenge the parallel erasures—one from hardliners in the Iranian state, the other from secular dogmatists in the West—of everyday Iranians’ capacities to affect changes from within their society. While Ebadi’s memoir is neither a comprehensive history of Iranian politics or women’s movements, it offers historical complexity and nuance to questions of religion, politics, modernity and the state. For instance, in describing her mother’s era, she writes:

She did not wear the veil, for her family was not so traditional as to insist that its girls cover their hair. But she did witness the banning of the *hejab*, as part of the modernization campaign launched by Reza Shah, who crowned himself king of Iran in 1926. Turning an expansive country of villages and peasants overnight into a centralized nation with railroads and a legal code was a complex task. Reza Shah believed it would be impossible without the participation of the country’s women, and he set about emancipating them by banning the veil, the symbol of tradition’s yoke. Reza Shah was the first, but not the last, Iranian ruler to act out a political agenda—secular modernization, shrinking the clergy’s influence—on the frontier of women’s bodies. (Ebadi 2007, 7-8)

This passage is part of a larger discussion about the constraints and opportunities of women of Ebadi’s mother’s and grandmother’s generations. Ebadi shows the ways in

which a modernizing state consolidated its authority on and through the bodies of women. Moreover, Ebadi illustrates how a modernizing and secular state still barred women from educational opportunities. Her mother's ambitions to attend medical school were cut short by the demands on her to be married and raise a family. Ebadi's widowed grandmother, on the other hand, secured custody of her children and part of her deceased husband's assets through appeals to clerics in Qom, who often advocated on women's behalf.

This historical complexity runs throughout Ebadi's memoir, as she painstakingly tries to sever the metonymic framing of Islam *as* patriarchy. Instead, she historicizes the constraints Iranian women have faced in the modern period as part of a complex web of patriarchal practices emerging from the family, society and state, as I noted in Chapter 1. Religion and religious clerics are presented as historical and contemporary allies to women in many cases, and secularizing forces from the state are exposed as mechanisms of power and authority.

As Ebadi details the rise of her career—she graduated from law school at age twenty-two, and in 1970, became a judge at age twenty-three—she also chronicles her support for the growing opposition movement to the Shah. In the following passages, Ebadi again shows the ways in which religious sectors of Iranian society had historically been deeply involved in fighting for and building democratic practices:

The intervention of mullahs in Iranian politics was a historical phenomenon, as much of the ages as of the late 1970s. In 1906, for example, the mullahs lent their critical support to a movement that produced the Constitutional Revolution, which forced the reigning dynasty to decree a European-style constitution and legislative body into existence. For much of the previous two centuries, public space had been centered on the mosque and the bazaar. The mosque in particular offered a public gathering place where grievances against the moment's king could be freely aired and exchanged, behind the semiprotected walls of a holy building.

Our history was dotted with such fruitful illustrations of the mullah's intervention, and so to the ears of ordinary Iranians, myself included, it was neither shocking nor particularly foreboding to hear Ayatollah Khomeini raining invective down on the shah from exile. (Ebadi 2007, 32)

As I addressed in Chapter 1, the history of modern statehood and political movements in Iran should not be read through a religious/secular binary. Indeed, as Ebadi notes, religious figures and spaces historically often acted as a check to state power.

I found myself drawn to the opposition voices that hailed Ayatollah Khomeini as their leader. It seemed in no way a contradiction for me—an educated, professional woman—to back an opposition that cloaked its fight against real-life grievances under the mantle of religion. . . . Most of the country identified far more with the opposition, which included secular nationalists, socialists, and Marxists among its ranks. Among these opposition groups, the mullahs' voices were the loudest; it was the clergy, whose network of mosques spread out across the country, who had standing centers from which to raise their voices and organize. It did not seem so alarming that the mullahs should take the lead. (Ebadi 2007, 33-34)

Ultimately, the revolution fails Ebadi, as she is barred from her judgeship in its aftermath. But as she reflects throughout the remainder of her book, her faith in Islam, and the possibility of democracy emanating from within its tenets, is never challenged.

In the aftermath of the revolution and the years of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Ebadi witnesses the massive exile of her fellow Iranians. As she states, over the 1980s and 1990s roughly four to five million Iranians left (2007, 78). When her friends and colleagues leave, this is particularly devastating for her:

One by one, my dearest friends deserted. They packed up their belongings, said their good-byes, and, in my eyes, turned their backs on Iran. Each time I wearily picked up a pen to cross out yet another name in my address book, my disappointment crushed me. I felt as though I were living in an abandoned house that was decaying by the day, in the company of ghosts. (Ebadi 2007, 79)

Signaling the affective registers of political struggle, Ebadi's pain and disappointment become part of her political claim staking. In offering this affective register as a

“testimon[y] to [her] experience” (Brooks 2007, 141), Ebadi opens up space to critique exile and speak to the political and emotional effects of such massive flights from Iran.

In the beginning, I fought them. Each and every one of them, when they declared their intent to leave, faced my perhaps unfair flood of dissuasion and protest. I knew that the decision to leave was deeply personal. And, true, I didn't have sons. *But all the same, as an ethical and political stand, I didn't believe in leaving Iran.* (Ebadi 2007, 79, emphasis added)

It is this moment, more than any difficulties that followed, that Ebadi identifies as the lowest point of her life (2007, 81). What is so remarkable is her willingness to critique chosen exile as political and ethical liability, and the commitment to staying as its antidote. This is striking when read against the genre of Iranian women's memoirs that dramatize their flight from Iran as the condition of their putative freedom. In laying claim to staying and working within Iran, Ebadi envisions a political and affective space beyond despair, fear and cynicism, even as she faces disappointment.

By staying in Iran, Ebadi becomes part of and helps shape the tremendous reform movement that emerges in Iran. As Ebadi is forced from her judgeship, she turns in the 80s and 90s to practicing law again, deciding to engage legal frameworks from within the parameters set up by the Islamic Republic. Like the One Million Signatures campaigners after her, Ebadi cultivates a pragmatic approach to changing what she identifies as outdated legal codes to reflect the social justice ethos of ordinary Iranians. Ebadi distinguishes between “the politico-religious worldview of ... traditionalists” (2007, 118) and those, like her, who began to “advocate for female equality in an Islamic framework” (2007, 122). As Ebadi continues, “If I'm forced to ferret through musty books of Islamic jurisprudence and rely on sources that stress the egalitarian ethics of Islam, then so be it. Is it harder this way? Of course it is. But is there an alternative battlefield?” (2007, 122)?

It is precisely this battlefield that Ebadi and other feminist reformers staged and continue to stage their struggles.

By staying in Iran and engaging the discursive framework of the state, Ebadi refuses to be positioned as the native informant who becomes implicated in the political projects of Western hegemony. Moreover, Ebadi helps legitimize the burgeoning Islamic feminist and reform movements that exploded in Iran in the 1990s. As Ebadi notes, by the time of Khatami's first election in 1997, notions of "Islamic democracy" (2007, 142) are emanating from all corners of Iran. Indeed, as Ebadi asserts, it was not Khatami who created the space for this discourse, but the work of everyday citizens and activists that made his election possible:

The reform era, for all its political discontents, did much to relax our daily lives. The morality police were by no means retired, but they went from omnipresent invaders to a periodic nuisance. President Khatami deserves only a measure of credit for this shift. Really it was because my daughters' uncowed generation started fighting back and, through the force of their sheer numbers and boldness, made it unfeasible for the state to impose itself as before. (Ebadi 2007, 180)

While it's true that youth were and still are at the forefront of social change struggles in Iran, they have been emboldened, in part, by the work of Ebadi's generation, those who stayed in Iran and used the contradictory phenomena of Islamization to press for reforms.

In 2003, Ebadi worked with female MPs to draft a bill on family law. As Ebadi remembers her exchange with one MP, "'Write something that broadens women's rights, but in a way that's compatible with Islam,' she requested, 'so that we can defend it on the floor'" (Ebadi 2007, 185). Ebadi drafted a law that "included everything we sought in terms of divorce rights, embedded in sharia in a way that was wholly defensible" (2007, 186). The MPs approved it, but asked Ebadi to conceal the fact that she was the bill's author, so as not to threaten the hardliners in parliament. However, Ebadi was forced to

confront hardline clerics in the parliament when the female MPs asked her to defend the bill's compliance with Islamic law when they weren't able to do so. This confrontation, in which Ebadi argues that the husband's consent is not required for a woman to divorce him, results in Ebadi being thrown out of the court. Ultimately, the bill failed.

This experience forces Ebadi to confront the limits of Islamic reform under a regime dominated by hardliners. But Ebadi locates those limits in the political apparatuses of those forces in the state who use illegal tactics (in terms of both civil and Islamic laws) to crush dissent, not in the mechanism of *ijtihad* itself, nor the compatibility of Islam and gender equality. And while these limits seem to her intractable at times, Ebadi refuses to relinquish the pragmatic feminist reform strategies that have promised and at times, delivered, critical victories over patriarchal codes. Although Ebadi has been forced into exile due to her involvement in the Green movement, her own narrative speaks to the political commitment to stay and work in Iran, on behalf of Iranians. A critic of both the repressive actions of the Iranian state and any kind of U.S. or Western intervention into Iran, Ebadi represents a democratic, feminist, anti-war alternative grounded in local and global discourses of Islamic democracy and human rights. In consistently arguing for reform within Islam, in reflecting desire of ordinary Iranians, and in claiming herself as one; in critiquing political power of repressive regime and the same time as speaking as a Muslim and a feminist; and finally in refusing to exile herself, Ebadi refuses the position of native informant. She offers an alternative subject position to native informants who become willing bedfellows of neo-Orientalist, imperialist projects.

In using the genre of the memoir to elaborate her claims, Ebadi offers what Watson and Smith call “an alternative way of knowing” (1992, xx). As “a process and product of decolonization” (Watson and Smith 1992, xxi), Ebadi’s memoir has “the potential to intervene in the comfortable alignments of power relationships” (Watson and Smith 1992, xx). As Watson and Smith claim, the “self-representation and self-presentation” of the marginalized subject through autobiography are politic acts:

They also have the potential to celebrate through countervalorization another way of seeing, one unsanctioned, even unsuspected, in the dominant cultural surround. And with shifts in vision can follow social change, even creations of new worlds, since, as Arif Dirlik argues, “culture is not only a way of seeing the world, but also a way of making and changing it.”

Also in this alternative space, narrative itineraries may take different paths. For the colonial subject, the process of coming to writing is an articulation *through* interrogation, a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure. (Watson and Smith 1992, xx)

While Ebadi is a particularly privileged colonial subject in that she is highly educated and transnationally mobile, the geopolitical and cultural conditions I’ve outlined throughout the dissertation have certainly worked to silence a narrative such as hers. On its own, but also in relation to the neo-Orientalist memoirs of exiled Iranian and Muslim women, Ebadi’s memoir becomes part of the “living proof” that is constituted by and is constitutive of a politics of hope. But to what extent, and to what intended and unintended ends Ebadi is read and analyzed is certainly beyond her and anyone else’s control. In the next section I address some of the perils and promises inhering in the transnational reception of Ebadi.

“Discrepant Audiences:” Transnational Perils and Promises of Reading Ebadi

Reading discourses of “democracy” and “democratization” in the Middle East within the context of a post-9/11, neoliberal world order poses a major challenge. The U.S. and European “democracy projects” in Afghanistan and Iraq have in fact been in the service of imperialist occupation and war profiteering. As I address in Chapter 3, George W. Bush’s rhetorical war against Iran helped consolidate the hardliners’ rise to power in Iran and intensify the vast anti-Muslim sentiments circulating within the West. Indeed, the war on the Muslim world has not been simply rhetorical, as the actual occupations show and as the U.S. continues its policies of isolation, containment, and sanctions towards Iran. Transnational circulation of “indigenous feminist” texts of Middle Eastern and Muslim women makes them vulnerable to misinterpretation by unintended or unwanted allies, who may seek to appropriate their texts for different kinds of means.

But unlike Nafisi, who has developed deep ties to neoliberals like Bernard Lewis, Ebadi has had a very different transnational reception. In fact, “[s]anction regulations in the United States, it turned out, made it virtually impossible for [Ebadi] to publish a memoir in America” (Ebadi 2007, 210). The U.S., then, is never a site for unmitigated freedom for Ebadi. In 2004, she sued the Treasury Department and ultimately forced them to revise “its regulations on publications of works by citizens of embargoed nations” (2007, 213). One must ask if such practices of exclusion and erasure were enacted on Nafisi and other Iranian authors, and examine the range of effects flowing out from sanctions, and the particular bodies such sanctions target.

The aim of Ebadi’s memoir, in her words, was “to correct Western stereotypes of Islam, especially the image of Muslim women as docile, forlorn creatures” (2007, 210),

and while it's not possible to quantify her success, one must ask how widely she has been read in the West. Compared to Nafisi, fewer Western readers recognize Ebadi's name, or the fact that she won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2003.⁵ While I could not locate accurate sales data for *Iran Awakening*, the number of reviews and other citations of Ebadi's memoir between its release and 2011 in a LexisNexis search totaled 106 compared to 609 reviews and other citations of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* between 2003 and 2011. While Nafisi's book has been out longer, its citational frequency is clearly more indicative of the popularity of its content and reception within contemporary geopolitics.

Reviews of Ebadi have tended to be mixed. While some focus on her commitment to using the discourses of Islam for democratic change from within (Aslan 2006), others focus on the particular tribulations she endured (Secor 2006). These divisions tend to fall along political lines: Aslan wrote for left-leaning *The Nation*, while Secor wrote for the more centrist *New York Times*. What is also revealing is Ebadi's claim that in her travels since the Nobel Prize award, she has "realized that Iran is still unknown to the people of many countries. That is to say, inaccurate propaganda has portrayed Iran as worse or better than it actually is" (2007, 217). My supposition is that this propaganda comes from the "secular dogmatists" outside Iran and the hardliners inside the regime, each who deepen the need for interventions such as Ebadi's.

While it might be possible to read the transnational reception of Ebadi as playing into the ubiquitous framing of good (innocent) citizens of Iran pitted against bad

⁵ This claim is based on many, many casual conversations I've had about my dissertation, which, on the mention of Iran and women, immediately turned towards a discussion of Nafisi. When I would describe my project as one which includes an analysis of Ebadi, virtually no one, from academics to laypeople, knew of or had read Ebadi.

(repressive) state, I find Mani's (1990) ideas about "discrepant audiences" and the politics of location useful in applying transnational reading and reception practices that don't further silence Ebadi. If we are to understand and read Ebadi from her position as an Iranian Muslim woman writing from within Iranian spaces, but with the aim of greater elucidation for Western readers, how might we think about the ways in which her discourses get taken up by different readers? Recognizing that Ebadi, too, is mired in a particular political moment, where the production of knowledge about Iran and Islam and the transnational circulation and reception of such knowledge always risk complicity with dangerous discursive and material practices, is there an epistemic mode that does not attach to these dangerous practices, or the equally dangerous mode of cynical abstentionism? As I argue in Chapter 3, parts of the Iranian diaspora have disengaged from Iran, writing it off as an untenable space. Some sectors of the U.S. left, particularly after the 2009 election fraud, enact another kind of disengagement, dismissing the Green movement and defending Ahmedinejad as an anti-imperialist. I argue that political and intellectual disengagements constitute an epistemic mode of silencing.

In her essay, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception," Lata Mani reflects on the processes and dilemmas of writing about debates on the practice of sati in India, but more aptly about the politics of knowledge production in a neo- and post-colonialist set of relations. Mani takes stock of the ways in which feminists have theorized the "revolt of the particular against that masquerading as the general" (1990, 26), or the situated knowledges of women and people of color against the disembodied, masculinist knowledge that poses as universal. She explores the way post-colonial feminists like Chandra Mohanty (1987) pushed these

initial feminist discourses. Quoting Mohanty, Mani points to the ways Mohanty argues for a more complex politics of location “characterized by multiple locations and nonsynchronous processes of movement ‘between cultures, languages, and complex configurations of meaning and power’” (Mani 1990, 26). Mani applies Mohanty’s ideas to her own project, writing that “[t]his definition of the space of politics very nicely illuminates the dynamics of how my conception of a project on the debate on *sati* in colonial India bears the traces of movement between cultures and configurations of meaning” (1990, 26). Pondering the ways that audiences in the US, Britain and India “seized on entirely different aspects of [her] work as politically significant,” (1990, 27), Mani asserts:

These responses in turn have caused me to reflect on how moving between different ‘configurations of meaning and power’ can prompt different ‘modes of knowing’. The experience has also required me squarely to confront a problem not adequately theorized in discussions of positionality or of the function of theory and criticism: the politics of simultaneously negotiating not multiple but discrepant audiences (Mani 1990, 27).

I argue that we must read Ebadi and the particular production of Muslim feminism that she elaborates within the context of discrepant audiences. Reading Ebadi only within discourses of democracy and democratization emanating from neoliberals and neoconservatives in the West who support dangerous interventions in Iran elides the complex and painstaking ways in which Ebadi has struggled to elaborate discourses of democracy *internal* to Iran.

Mani’s discussion is very particular to her experiences speaking to audiences in Britain, the U.S. and India about the politics and history of *sati*, and her experience “dramatizes the dilemma of post-colonial intellectuals working on the Third World in the West” (1990, 31). Her political landscape is different than Ebadi’s, as her own position is,

but Mani raises important questions that are useful for my thinking about the transnational triangulations of Ebadi, the One Million Signatures Campaign, and other kinds of Iranian feminist engagements with the West. Furthermore, Mani provides a way of thinking about my own complicity in colonial forms of knowledge production. As she asserts, many post-colonial intellectuals working on the Third World from within the West have been accused of “inauthenticity or ideological contamination by the West” (1990, 31). As Mani continues, “[A]ssertions about ideological contamination are often shorthand allusions to genuine issues, such as asymmetries in the material conditions of scholarship in metropolitan and Third World contexts. Such problems are, however, not clarified by a moralistic formulation of the issue in terms of purity or pollution” (1990, 31).

Mani attempts to confront real relations of power, at the same time that she recognizes the different reading and reception practices of her discrepant audiences, and the effects such practices might have on thinking about women’s agency in colonial contexts. As Mani found in discussing her work in both India and the West, audiences in the West tended to “aggrandize” colonialism as a force in thinking about *sati*, while audiences in India tended to minimize it, instead focusing on the Indian state (1990, 32). Instead of thinking of her work only as contaminated, Mani found that she now “inescapably participate[s] in multiple conversations, not all of which overlap” (1990, 32).

What is powerful in applying Mani’s framework to how Ebadi’s discourses become refracted through transnational reception and reading practices is the ways in which such practices might open up the possibility for thinking about complex modes of

agency that come from Iranian women themselves. In other words, while looking at the ways in which scholars and activists are contaminated by and complicit in what is now most powerful at the global level—neoliberal regimes of Western economic, military and ideological dominance—can be useful, it not only assumes there is an alternative space of purity, but it fails to capture other epistemic and political emphases.

Ebadi, as someone invested in the project of reforming Islamic law in favor of a gender justice perspective, might be read by some in the West as contaminated by the projects of democratizing Iran and the Middle East vis-à-vis a retooling of Islam imposed by secular-liberal Western regimes. Her mere association with the genre of Iranian women's memoirs may have the unintended effects of consolidating the trope and function of the native informant. But assuming *only* that reading and reception ignores the ways in which Ebadi positions herself as an Iranian, a feminist and a Muslim committed to the project of transforming Iran from within, and more importantly the ways ordinary Iranian citizens and activists themselves have both mobilized and enriched Ebadi's praxis. In foregrounding the particular discourses of Ebadi through a counterhegemonic reading practice, I hope to make space for and amplify the politics of hope and possibility I believe are, in fact, an essential part of her project.

Reading Ebadi's memoir and the discourses that surrounded her Nobel Prize within a politics of location that mediates discrepant audiences requires notions of agency internal to the historic context in which she writes. As I have tried to show throughout the dissertation, the hermeneutical and exegetical practices of rereading Islam within a gender justice framework that Ebadi and the One Million Signatures Campaign engage are enabled through the *ijtihad* tradition within Shi'i Islam. Ebadi, like the campaign, is

part of the new publics who are accessing Islamic discourses through cyber and print culture, and bringing their lived realities to bear on such discourses. Iranian reformers' success at the discursive and sometimes even at the formal level in reframing Islamic law to incorporate a perspective of gender justice reflected cultural shifts in Iranian society towards greater equality for women. Within the nexus of legal reforms and everyday discourses and practices in the last two decades in Iran emerged a movement of Islamic feminists and a deep penetration of their praxis into Iranian society. It is within this context that Iranian women's agency must be understood.

As Mani argues, using a "complex sense of agency" allows for the recognition of women's victimization and the possibility for struggling against it as located within the victim/agent herself (1990, 37-38). Without this complex sense of agency, Mani argues, "we run the risk of producing a discourse which sets women up to be saved. This would situate women within feminist analysis in ways that are similar to their positioning within colonialist or nationalist discourse" (1990, 38). There are various forces at work which produce such discourses of saving Iranian and Muslim women, as I elaborated in Chapter 3, including a feminist governmentality that recolonizes Iranian and Muslim women. It is critical to lay bare these hegemonic discourses that surface and resurface over and over again. That being said, there are other kinds of discourses emerging in ongoing and complex ways from Iranian women themselves. And there are discrepant audiences for whom different kinds of discourses fall on different kinds of ears. While anyone, myself included, doing post-colonial scholarship that engages local and global forces and actors in the post-9/11 era must contend with their own and their subjects' contamination and complicity in projects not of our making, we must not re-victimize our subjects through a

quest for a space of purity or a decontamination process that can never occur. Moreover, by recognizing the ways in which a figure like Ebadi interrupts the ideological toehold someone like Nafisi has had on the subject of “Iranian women,” a space of epistemic and political possibility begins to open up.

Conclusion

As she entered the transnational stage, Shirin Ebadi became an emblematic figure of Muslim feminism and Islamic democracy through her Nobel Prize award. Now on a transnational stage, Ebadi translated the particular discourses around Islam, democracy, women’s rights and reform she and other reformers had been engaging in for at least a decade. Her award resonated with Iranians around the world, and reformers inside Iran capitalized on her transnational recognition by continuing to push for reforms in Islamic law.

In publishing her memoir, Ebadi sought to continue that translation project, making a crucial intervention into world-wide debates about Islam and democracy. While a cautionary approach to the ways in which the transnational circulation and reception of her discourses could intersect with projects not of her making—particularly those of saving Iranian women and refashioning (eliminating) Islam through military intervention by Western powers—is important, reading Ebadi only through this danger further silences the project of Iranian feminism indigenous to Iran.

As this dissertation project has been largely an attempt to consider how Iranian women themselves understand and frame their struggle for reforming their society, I assert that Ebadi should be read within a complex understanding of agency. The

discourses surrounding her Nobel Prize win and her memoir can be read as cutting against the neo-Orientalist genre of Iranian and Muslim women's "freedom flights." Moreover, acknowledging that Ebadi's discourses travel to discrepant audiences, whose interests might signal emphases different than those of scholars and activists in the West, might facilitate the epistemic and political project of Iranian feminism. Indeed, the politics of solidarity I argue for in Chapter 3 can be deepened through a consideration of this reading and reception practice.

Ebadi's memoir also contributes to production of hope and possibility I theorize in Chapter 3. Considering discourses and practices of feminism, democracy, and Islam through the projects of Iranians like Ebadi, who enact an ethical and political commitment to working within Iran, generates a different kind of knowledge project, one that might emphasize possibility over danger, local agency over global contamination.

As the field of transnational feminist studies evolves, it is critical that emerging scholars consider the unintended effects of their projects. While excellent work has been done on the perils of transnational discourses like human rights and feminism, both of which can mask configurations of power and authority embedded in such discourses, the "aggrandizement" of such forces can further silence the intellectual and political projects of women in the global South. Theoretical frameworks that examine the different forms of agency emerging out of the "living proof," or "offering of life stories, subjectivities, bodily materialities, and practices by women as acts of courage and political claim staking," (Brooks 2007, 138) can open up new affective and intellectual spaces in such fraught and perilous times.

Seeking to amplify the hope produced through the life story Ebadi offers, I end this chapter as Ebadi ends her memoir, with a description of her flight from Paris to Tehran after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, and the crowd that greeted her at the Tehran airport. I'm cognizant of the fact that in attempting to claim a space and politics of hope through my own appropriation of Ebadi's story, I have been complicit in relations of power that shape the "colonizing nature of research" (Bahkru 2008, 202). This is part of what Brooks calls the "conundrum of living proof" (2007, 138). And yet, as Brooks also reminds us, living proof "cannot be possessed" (2007, 142). Trusting that the profound hope Ebadi generates will wildly exceed what my scholarly analysis tries to harness and contain, let me give Ebadi the last word.

On board the plane, the Iran Air flight captain came over to congratulate me and moved Nargess and me up to the first-class cabin. Soon the stewardess started ferrying note of congratulations from the other passengers. They kept coming, until I decided to walk through the plane and shake hands with people. The passengers were bubbling over with excited congratulations, save two very serious men, who warned that I should be careful not to undermine the honor of those who had shed their blood for the people and Islam. "The honor of the martyrs," I said, "is so valuable that it cannot be blemished by a single individual; but please rest assured."

The captain announced that he was calling our journey the Flight of Peace, and he invited my daughter and me up to the cockpit. ...

The plane skidded to a stop on the tarmac, and the flight attendant asked me to disembark first, guiding me to the door of the plane. When it swung open, the first thing I saw was my mother's shining face. I took her soft, wrinkled hands in mine and pressed them against my lips. And then I leaned back and finally noticed the crowd, stretching out as far as I could see. Ayatollah Khomeini's granddaughter stepped forward and placed a wreath of delicate orchids around my neck. The crowd surged forward on all sides. ... I inhaled a great breath and belted out the loudest *Allaho akbar!* I could manage. ...

... I could tell the crowd must number in the hundred of thousands. ... The last time such a great human mass had descended on Tehran airport, the year was 1979 and the figure on board the flight from Paris was Ayatollah Khomeini. Only this time, you could see from the mass of head scarves that women composed the majority of the crowd. ... "They walked here," my brother whispered in my ear. "They drove until the roads were jammed, left their cars, and walked. The flights

have all been canceled because all the roads to the airport are blocked with people.”

... As we finally made our way to the car and slowly drove forward, the crowds parted to let us ahead, and through the window I watched the faces slide by, hopeful, serious, proud, but, most of all, so *alive*. Near the arched monument built by the shah in south Tehran now renamed Freedom Square, I caught sight of a woman with a child in one hand, a makeshift poster in the other, and the sight made my breath catch, for her sign read, “This is Iran.” (Ebadi 2007, 203-208)

CONCLUSION

Towards a Politics of Hope: Renewing Transnational Feminist Praxis

Feminist theory must always function in two directions if it is to effectively challenge patriarchal knowledges. On the one hand, it must engage in what could be called a *negative* or *reactive* project—the project of challenging what currently exists, or criticizing prevailing social, political, and theoretical relations. . . . But if it remains *simply* reactive, *simply* a critique, it ultimately affirms the very theories it may wish to move beyond. It necessarily remains on the very ground it aims to contest. To say something is *not* true, valuable, or useful *without posing alternatives* is, paradoxically, to affirm that it *is* true, and so on. Thus coupled with this negative project, or rather, indistinguishable from it, must be a positive, constructive project: creating alternatives, producing *feminist*, not simply *anti-sexist*, theory. Feminist theory must exist as *both* critique *and* construct.

—Elizabeth Grosz, “Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity”

Almost a decade after Shirin Ebadi’s historic Nobel Peace Prize award, as talk of military intervention in Iran grows louder and repression against Iranian activists intensifies, it would be naïve and irresponsible to talk only of hope. As I claimed in the introduction to this dissertation, as scholars and activists with passionate attachments, we swing between hope and despair. To illustrate this pendulum in motion, let me return to the second postcard I offered in my introduction, when my Iranian family visiting the U.S. reported the fear and panic percolating in the lives of ordinary Iranian citizens. The *New York Times* recently reported that “Western sanctions are hurting Iranians...by causing increased shortages, unemployment and inflation. Iran’s currency, the rial, has plunged in value against the dollar in recent months and on [January 2] hit a new all-time low” (Gladstone 2012). Relatives, friends, and relatives of friends offer story after story, narrating the palpable fear and anxiety rising every day in the voices, bodies and lives of

Iranians. A little more than eight years after Shirin Ebadi touched down in Tehran amidst hundreds of thousands joyous Iranians, this, too, is Iran.

As I complete the writing of this dissertation, the Ninth parliamentary elections are about to take place in Iran. As part of the Green movement that has been unfolding over the last three years, reformist opposition figures Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, former presidential candidates in the 2009 election, are “urging followers to stay away from the polls” (Gladstone 2012) as an act of protest against state repression. Former president Khatami has added his voice to the protest, urging his supporters to boycott the elections unless the house-arrests for Moussavi and Karroubi are lifted and political prisoners who participated in the Green movement opposition are freed (Amirahmadi and Shahidsales 2012). As the *New York Times* reports, there has been some talk that Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei “may propose to the next Parliament that the office of the president be abolished, to be replaced by a system in which lawmakers select a prime minister” (Gladstone 2012), a move, in Khamenei’s mind, to consolidate his authority, but one which will surely further undermine the credibility of the current regime. This, too, is Iran.

And yet, if this dissertation has attempted to carve out a space and politics of hope amidst the overwhelming fear and despair now threatening to extinguish such hope, let me then offer a different set of postcards from Iran, at the other end of the pendulum. Postcard one: In the following excerpt from an interview with one of the activists from the One Million Signatures Campaign, this campaigner elatedly describes the scene on the ground during the summer of protests that followed the June 2009 presidential elections.

I was talking to one of the guys in Iran and he said one of the beautiful things he saw was a middle-aged woman talking to a *basiji* [paramilitary civilian police member]. She would say “*pesaram* [my son], why would you do this? I know you have to do your job, but don’t beat [the protesters] so hard.” He said [he didn’t] know what the woman then said to the *basiji*, but the *basiji* kissed her hand. All the time I see these women standing and talking to the military people, talking to the *basijis*, trying in a very sophisticated, peaceful way to say, we’re the ones who are going to live together. You are like my son. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

This, too, is Iran.

Postcard two: In mid-January, Asghar Farhadi, the director of the critically-acclaimed Iranian film, “A Separation,” comes to the stage to accept the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film. With a dignity and modesty that characterizes many Iranians, Farhadi accepts the award in a nearly hushed tone with the following words:

When I was coming up on the stage, I was thinking what should I say here. Should I say something about my mother, father, my kind wife, my daughters, my dear friends, my great and lovely crew. But now I just prefer to say something about my people. I think they are a truly peace-loving people. Thank you very much. (Farhadi 2012)

I haven’t even seen the movie at this point, but I can’t hold back the tears. Simply, beautifully, powerfully, Farhadi has just said to the world: Please don’t bomb us. As Iranian family, friends, and fellow activists madly post to Facebook in the next hours and days, I feel an overwhelming sense of hope that just maybe, the geopolitical tides might shift in our favor. A truly peace-loving people—this, too, is Iran.

In offering these postcards, I do not mean to instantiate a simple opposition between Iranian rulers and the Iranian people, a move often made by the neo-Orientalists to legitimize Western intervention in Iran. As the 2009 presidential elections revealed, there are and have always been different fissures and factions within the post-revolutionary state, and not just along conservative and reformist lines, but factions and

differences within both camps. Even Khamenei and Ahmadienijad have not been aligned on all issues. What is clear now, however, in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections and the run-up to the March parliamentary elections and the 2013 presidential elections, the reformists have been sidelined.

But as this dissertation has shown, Iranian politics cannot be understood in isolation, or only at the level of formal politics. The heightened repression of activists since the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, and the paranoid maneuvering of the current regime to sideline any and all reform opposition, must be seen in the context of the ever-louder clamber of war drums emanating from the heart of empire. What once, just a few short years ago, seemed highly debatable, if not completely implausible, now feels imminent. The question seems less and less like one of “*Will* the U.S. invade Iran?” and more and more like one of “*When* will the U.S. invade Iran?”

This is the awful moment we are living in, when the waiting for war is happening in the minds and bodies of lives lived inside a war by other means. When the fear and anticipation of the bombs, tanks, jets, and guns, the fear and anticipation of death—because war is, after all, *death*—is taking place in the minds and bodies of those living inside scarcity, shortage, inflation and unemployment. Sanctions are war by other means. They target, indeed, but not the rogue despot. They target people, millions and millions of people. Can it be that, somehow, already, the experience of Iraq has vanished from our historical memory?

Sanctions against Iran are not new. For over thirty years, Iran has suffered from some type of economic sanctions. Since Obama took office, “the sanctions have been amped up to new heights,” according to the Raha Iranian Feminist Collective.

In June of 2010, a US-led United Nations coalition passed the fourth round of economic and trade sanctions against the Islamic Republic since 2006. The stated goal: limiting Iran's nuclear program. Soon after, the European Union imposed its own set of economic sanctions. A month later, President Obama signed into law the most extensive sanctions regime Iran has ever seen with the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA). (Raha Iranian Feminist Collective 2011)

In November 2011, the International Atomic Energy Agency issued a report, “the harshest judgment that United Nations weapons inspectors had ever issued in their decade-long struggle to pierce the secrecy surrounding the Iranian program,” setting off a new round of sanctions from the U.S. and the EU. These sanctions were “aimed at its central bank and commercial banks.” The U.S. “also imposed sanctions on companies involved in Iran’s nuclear industry, as well as on its petrochemical and oil industries” as a way of strengthening “existing measures that seek to weaken the Iranian government by depriving it of its ability to refine gasoline or invest in its petroleum industry.” In response, Iran threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz and stop oil exports to Britain and France. In January 2012, an Iranian nuclear scientist was killed by an explosive device attached to his car. Iran blamed Israel and the U.S. When bombs exploded in February in the country of Georgia, and in India and Thailand, Israel blamed Iran and intimated at a military strike (*New York Times* 2012).

If three years ago, Iranians had hoped that the translation of Obama’s name into Farsi—*oo ba ma*, he is with us—might act as a cathexis, pushing foreign policy into a different direction than that pursued by the Bush administration, they are now experiencing something they had not anticipated. Taking U.S.-Iran tensions to an all time high, Obama and his hawkish Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, are pursuing war by

other means. Sanctions are not a diplomatic alternative to war; they are part and parcel of the colonial and imperialist drives towards hegemony and war.

As I noted in Chapter 3, some parts of the U.S. and transnational activist community still believe that targeted sanctions are a human substitute for war, that they are a component of human rights discourses which target the Iranian state for its human rights abuses. In calling for and supporting sanctions, these human rights activists believe they are enacting solidarity with the Iranian people. Some of these activists will ultimately come to rationalize or outright support military intervention in Iran, arguing that it is the only means for shifting or ending the power of the current regime.

In response to U.S. policy towards Iran and increasing calls for military intervention, other solidarity activists have defended Ahmadienjad and the Iranian regime, arguing that they represent the Iranian people's desire for peace and self-determination. Framing their argument as anti-imperialist, these activists believe any opposition to the Iranian government inside Iran is backed by the U.S. government, which is imposing regime change by orchestrating a protest movement against the current leaders. They didn't and still don't support the Green movement and believe Ahmadinejad won the 2009 presidential elections fair and square. They believe that by supporting Ahmadinejad and the regime, that the enemy of their enemy is their friend. As I elaborated in Chapter 3, these two positions represent a poverty of choices about how to build solidarity with the Iranian people.

Throughout the dissertation, I have tried to show the extent to which change from within Iran is not only possible, but has been happening over the last few decades in quite profound ways. Contrary to the Orientalist narrative that women (and all people) enjoyed

a good (i.e., modernized, secularized, Westernized) life under the Shah, and that the 1979 Revolution signaled a setback of their gains, I have argued that the post-revolutionary period has improved women's lives and facilitated women's political participation in dynamic and innovative ways.

From the early twentieth century to the current moment, the mobilization of gendered discourses and women's political participation have been part of the national project of the modernizing state. While the nation-building program of the Pahlavi era instituted reforms in women's education and health, and a relatively progressive 1967/1975 Family Protection Law, it enacted such reforms in a top-down, sometimes violent way. Moreover, the Pahlavi reforms and economic policies benefited primarily middle and upper-class urban women. Under the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah in particular, class stratification and cultural Westernization combined to alienate many sectors of society, including many women. Supported by the majority of the Iranian population, the 1979 Revolution mobilized vast numbers of women who were deeply critical of the Shah's policies.

The key theorists of the Revolution, Khomeini and Shari'ati, continued the nation-building project, but mobilized women's participation in the Revolution through Islamic discourses of equality and rights. While their discourses were often general or vague, they appealed to many women, particularly working-class, rural and conservative women, who were on the margins of the Shah's stratified Iran. In the years following the Revolution, however, Khomeini instituted patriarchal laws, creating a discriminatory legal structure along gendered lines.

But a focus on the discriminatory legal structure of Iran tells only part of the story of the post-revolutionary period. The last thirty years have also witnessed massive rises in women's education, literacy, life expectancy, and health, and substantial declines in their fertility. The "redistributive character of the Islamic Republic" (Halper 2010, 4) has meant that many Iranians now enjoy clean and accessible water, access to education and healthcare, greater life expectancies, and overall improvements in their lives. The revolutionary state did deliver on many of its promises, and for this reason, has historically enjoyed support from the general population.

Mobilized by and benefiting from the Revolution in many ways, women began to challenge their legal exclusion using the very discourses that had promised them equality under Islam. The rise of Islamic feminist discourses in spaces like the press and parliament had a profound effect on the whole society. As women sought and received support from religious reformers—clerics and lay religious leaders—their discourses entered into the rich culture of political and religious debate that characterizes Iran.

In this dissertation, I have sought to bring this recent history to bear on a more current moment, the post-Khatami period (from 2005 on), or what some argue is the end of the formal reform period (Saghafi 2004). I have argued that while Islamic feminists in parliament were successful, in a limited way, in changing discriminatory laws, Islamic feminist discourses as a whole have even more successfully penetrated Iranian society. With the rise of the Internet, new publics have both gained access to and become producers of new Islamic discourses like Islamic feminism, which frame women's human rights within Islam as compatible with individual rights and international human rights conventions.

Indeed, this phenomenon, I argue, is part of the complex landscape of Iran, which is “democratizing from the inside out” (Hoodfar 2009, 60) despite of, or perhaps because of, the challenging geopolitical climate its citizens find themselves in. Through an examination of the One Million Signatures Campaign, the campaign’s transnational network, and the writings and reception of Shirin Ebadi, I have shown that the democratization process in Iran is far from over, as new political cultures and discourses coalesce through innovative, dynamic, democratic networks. As these networks are enabled through cyberspace and print culture, and through relationships between activists in Iran and those in the diaspora, I show how Iranian feminism is both a local and transnational phenomenon.

I have drawn on scholarly work that shows the ways in which Iranian feminists have engaged the transnational sphere (Moghadam 2002; Moghadam and Gheytnchi 2010; Tohidi 2003). Yet, I have also added something new to that literature by showing how Iranian feminists are not just drawing on, but profoundly reanimating and expanding the terrain of transnational feminism. In putting the specific praxis of the local and transnational One Million Signatures Campaign and the discourses, circulation, and reception of Shirin Ebadi in conversation with the larger field of transnational feminism, I have shown how the strategies, ideas, methods and visions of one group of Iranian feminists have enriched the field of transnational feminist struggle. Following Grosz (1990), I have tried to offer critique *and* construct.

Too often, analyses of transnational relations of power, including regimes of feminism that construct Western feminist subjectivity in a hierarchical and power-laden relationship to non-Western women, fail to tell the stories of non-Western feminist

activists from their own perspectives. In this sense, I've offered back what was offered to me, the "living proof" that can allow for political claim staking and a theorization of hope and possibility (Brooks 2007). If transnational feminism is to be truly transnational—flowing in multiple directions and not simply from West to rest—we need better, richer, and many more accounts of the lives of the very activists doing the difficult, painstaking political labor that goes into building transnational feminist networks.

While, as Brooks claims, no one and nothing can possess living proof or the affective dimensions that are part of it, I have certainly accrued a tremendous amount of hope through my attachment to and relationship with the living proof that make possible this project. In trying to make sense of the stories of Iranian feminists activists, those that I have read and studied deeply over the years and those spoken in generosity and trust to me in California, I have become what Brooks calls a witness to living proof. "Witnessing and the offering of living proof disrupt the production of knowledge and trouble the boundaries of self and other that are central to maintaining difference" (Brooks 2007, 142). While I cannot possess the hope I bore witness to, I seek to share it so that it might be useful to others engaging in transnational feminist work. In offering a way of thinking through the dilemmas of feminism and transnational political work that might generate hope instead of despair, I have sought to disrupt the colonial nature of knowledge production even as I have surely participated in it.

At the end of 2010, and through most of 2011, hope was decidedly one of the animating factors around the world. From Tunisia to Egypt to Wisconsin to Greece to New York, the grassroots uprisings for political democracy, and economic and social justice shook us all out of despair, and put hope and possibility on the landscape in ways

we are still reeling from. Try as we may, it is probably still too early to fully comprehend why and how this happened when it did, how these different points of struggle might all be connected, and what will happen next. What we can say, though, is that most of these uprisings came from below, included vast sectors of society, were peaceful (though reactions by authorities to them often were not), and seemed to reflect a desire for relationships of deep horizontalism and democracy among the movement activists themselves.

Khamenei and others in the Iranian government “have sought to portray their country as the true genesis of the Arab Spring political uprisings” (Gladstone 2012) and have performed support for the Occupy movement by staging a “rally” of stern-looking, black chador-clad Iranian women with “The End of Wall St” signs.¹ In making connections between Iran, the Arab uprisings and the Occupy movement, I clearly reject this cynical maneuvering by the Iranian regime. Instead, I am struck by the connections between the horizontalism and leaderless structure of the One Million Signatures Campaign and the Green movement, many of the Arab Spring uprisings, and the Occupy movement. It feels like something epochal could be in the air.

Drawing once again on Asef Bayat (2007), the post-Islamist moment in Middle Eastern politics links many of the Arab Spring uprisings to the One Million Signatures Campaign and the Green movement through the bringing together of individual rights and religious precepts, democracy and Islam, faith and political engagement. Even outside of the Middle East, in the Occupy encampments in many parts of the U.S.,

¹ This photo circulated on Facebook and the Occupy website, generating lots of confusion. While it’s not clear what the exact source is, most Iranian activists I’ve spoken with agree that the photo looks like a government-staged rally along the lines of the many government-staged “Down with the U.S.A.” rallies used as anti-West propaganda.

religious activists of many faiths joined the movement, praying, meditating and participating in public with secular activists. There were few sectarian battles and people worked together peacefully.

What links the post-ideological turn in Iranian feminist politics (Mahdi 2003) to the post-Islamist turn in Middle Eastern social movements (Bayat 2007) to the presence of religion as a form of progressive political protest in the Occupy movement? I cannot hope to answer such a large question in these pages, but would suggest that what is circulating in different corners of the globe right now is the reclamation by ordinary people of the concept and practice of democracy, so distorted and maligned by imperial and sovereign power. As part of this new moment, feminists in Iran as elsewhere are making important contributions to the discourses and practices of democracy. As I elaborated in Chapter 2, the One Million Signatures Campaign has brought the relatively high status of women in Iran, vis-à-vis their educational and political aspirations and accomplishments as well as their society's shifting ideas about women's equality, to bear on the discriminatory legal structure of Iran. In so doing, the campaign argues that women's legal equality under Islam is inevitable. This faith in inevitability is now also reflected in the many democratic uprisings around the world. Even as Iranians, Arabs and Occupiers face rollbacks from their repressive military and state forces, still, there is an assumption—in their discourses, in their strategies, in the hopeful and continuous ways they continue to struggle—that says: our equality, our democracy, our victory, is inevitable.

In the transnational feminist praxis of the One Million Signatures Campaign and the emblematic Shirin Ebadi, the discourse of inevitability is part of the politics of hope

that Iranian feminists are creating. In response to injustices imposed by the Iranian state, they are crafting pragmatic and effective responses that build on the desires and ideals of everyday Iranian citizens for a gender and social justice vision of Islam. As their reform strategies circulate through their transnational networks, Iranian feminists are also challenging war, and the threat of war through isolation, containment, and sanctions. Through their epistemic, political and affective praxis of decolonization, justice, solidarity, and cross-border collaboration, Iranian feminist activists are reanimating the potential of transnational feminism.

Seeking transnational support and recognition, but only on their own terms, Iranian feminists are challenging the transnational feminist governmentality that would seek to revictimize and recolonize them through colonial saving and rescue narratives and human rights interventions. In building new political cultures and networks that are horizontal and democratic, and based on shared visions of justice and solidarity, Iranian feminists are recuperating transnational feminism from its capture by neoliberal governmentality and imperial democracy.

As the One Million Signatures Campaign carries on its work in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, activists are facing a number of questions about how to move forward. At the time of my interviews, campaigners had recently had a series of lengthy discussions about whether to merge with the Green movement or maintain some degree of autonomy. They decided to remain autonomous but continue their work inside of the larger opposition movement. As had already been the case, most of their discussions and efforts since June 2009 had been around the Green movement.

Reflecting on the connections between women's activism in Iran, the campaign and the larger Green movement, this activist asserts:

As we see during the protests, when we talk about campaign, I don't see the campaign [as] different from the rest of the movement. But you know, a good thing happened. The campaign definitely had an effect. Women, in past thirty years, the main target of the government was women. ... So women I think they were already so open to something like campaign because they were seeking a way out of all this troubles they had for the past hundred years. So when the campaign, you know, started, and then the members started talking to people, they were ready for change. They wanted the change. And I think in the post-election, we see that beneath this movement, the effects of women's rights movements or any other movements. Because people learned that they have to fight, they should want their rights. Rights is not something they give to you, you have to get it. The participation of women in all these protests was so strong. Like, from different types of backgrounds. I saw, like, very religious women and they would shout louder than anyone else. And I saw a woman carrying a baby, and I'm running out and she is asking where the people are, and she wants to go and join. For the first time, they are there not because of their husbands, not because of their sons. Just because of themselves. They're there to fight for their own rights. This is very important. During 1979, they were there for nationalism. But now this is the first time they're there because they want their own rights. And definitely, the campaign had a big part in getting them ready for that. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

In "establishing new lifestyles and new modes of thinking, being, and doing things," campaigners and the everyday citizens in Iran they are in conversation with are part of the "pervasive social movements" affecting a "democratic turn in Muslim societies" (Bayat 2007, 14).

Arguing for a theorization of the "social life" of "Muslim women's rights," Abu-Lughod asks, "How, in fact, do 'Muslim women's rights' produce our contemporary world" (2010, 102)? As the above excerpt from the campaigner shows, women's rights have "mediate[d] women's lives" (Abu-Lughod 2010, 102) in Iran through the vast shifts in the desires, practices, ideas and lived realities of activists and citizens who are producing our world in their quest for social justice. As this campaigner continues,

women's rights activists have led the way in shaping the peaceful and democratic character of the Green movement:

Women were almost [the] first group that start[ed] fighting silently. Like peaceful disobedience. Civil disobedience. But peacefully they just sat on the floor, on the streets. In 2005, you've seen the pictures of them getting beat up, so I think from there, they were the first. I mean individuals, the workers and laborers, they would just come sit in the middle of the streets, but [as] individuals. But as a group, I think women were the first ones who started this kind of [struggle]. I think they have a great effect on this movement being peaceful. This is why it still has stayed peaceful. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

Important political actors in shaping new social movements, women's rights activists are also transforming everyday relationships. As the campaigner continues:

But imagine, to be a million people, and this is [the] Iranian report, it's really more than three million, march[ing] down the streets and they don't even break a glass. And I think it's beautiful. ... Monday after elections, so we were all these people marching and it was so crowded, at one point, my feet wouldn't touch the ground, because it was so crowded. And then for the first time, I didn't feel like I'm a woman. Because there was no searching hands, no abusive act, nothing and I was surrounded with guys and we were all like this. ... So I think this shows how sophisticated the movement is. (interview with a campaigner, October 22, 2009)

As she describes being literally carried down the street by her fellow protesters, this activist also provides a powerful metaphor for the ways in which, together, activists and citizens in Iran are lifting each other up as they create new political cultures and new relationships based on justice, equality and democracy. In producing our contemporary world, they lift us all up, too.

APPENDIX A

The Effect of Laws on Women's Lives
Translated by Rahma Tohidi
Monday 28 August 2006

1. Marriage

In our country, Iran, marriage is an important affair which has a big impact on the lives of women. However, if we flip through the pages of the Book of Civil Law of Iran, we can see how marriage, which is supposed to be the "sweetness" of life, sometimes creates mental and physical problems for women, leaving a bitter taste they live with for the rest of their lives.

The first step a woman must take in marriage, according to the existing Law, is to satisfy the "condition of the father's consent"; if a father doesn't want his daughter to marry, she — even if she is a forty-year-old university professor — can never marry, unless approved by the courts. In fact, for marriage, virgin women must have their father or paternal grandfather's permission. If they do not satisfy this condition, their father or paternal grandfather can annul the marriage through the courts — even after the marriage has occurred. Some relate the philosophy of this act to the respect that is due to a father. However, our question is: must it be only daughters who pay respect to their fathers? And are sons not forced to pay respect to their fathers? More importantly, why is the respect and tribute paid only to the father? Why has the mother's respect been forgotten, with no requirement for her approval?

With the courts' permission, a father can marry his daughter, even before the age of 13, to a 70 year old man. Through this unjust law, the marriage of young girls in many

regions of our country, especially in rural villages, has come about — because the “law” has given the father this right.

That the legal age of marriage for girls in our law is 13 has caused a lot of problems in society. For example, a research study that has taken place in the county of Booshahr has shown that 70 percent of marriages which have ended in divorce have been from wives and husbands who married young — at 15 to 19.

2. Divorce

According to the law, divorce is the exclusive right of a man, and a man can divorce his wife whenever he pleases. On the other hand, if a divorce is initiated by the wife, she must prove her husband is guilty of misconduct: not paying her subsistence expenses, addiction or imprisonment, etc. Most know that proving such things in a court is difficult. In most cases, the wife can only prove them after many years of running around the court system. Of course, in most cases, women simply forfeit their mehr, in order to be freed of the harassment and domestic abuse of their husbands. Research done in the city of Qom found that 91% of women who got divorced did not claim their mehr in full. In many cases, where the divorce was agreed upon by both husband and wife, the wife has forfeited all her financial entitlements to secure the agreement of her husband. In many cases, the wife has even paid all the financial costs of the divorce. From a religious perspective, it is clearly stated that a woman may easily obtain divorce if she agrees to forfeit her mehr, however Iranian law has added the clause "must obtain husbands consent" to this; so if an Iranian woman wants to get a divorce, she must not only forfeit her mehr, but also obtain the consent of her husband.

A visit to the family court will show that when a man wants a divorce, he will put his wife under immense pressure to forfeit her mehr; so that she will request the divorce herself — forfeiting what little rights she had.

3. The right to have custody of children.

In our law, hezanat (day to day caring) and guardianship of children have two different meanings. Hezanat means to look after a child; and guardianship means: wardship, and managing financial affairs, decisions in relation to education, determining where to live, permission to leave the country, expressing opinion and permission to allow child's health treatments and other affairs. In accordance with Iran's civil law, a mother can never be the legal supporter of her child. Also, in a scenario where the father and paternal grandfather are absent, she will not have wardship; she can only be the caretaker of her child. However, in that situation, the mother's guardianship is directly under the observation of the child support agency (Attorney General). Even the right to sell the child's property resides with the child support agency.

A mother cannot open any account in her child's name, besides a loans account, or buy a house for her child without her husband's signature. If a mother (with her own money) does buy a house for her child with the father's permission, the father can sell or rent this house whenever he wants, and the mother has no right in this matter. Or, if a mother's child is sick in hospital and needs to have surgery, it is the father who has to give permission for the surgery to be done; without the father's signature the mother cannot ask the doctors to do surgery on her child. According to law, wardship and guardianship is the "manifest destiny" of the father. Meaning, even if the father himself wants, he cannot give guardianship of the child to his spouse!

4. Number of partners

Among other cases of inequality in the present marriage law is the discussion of the number of partners. That is, multiple wives for men; in such a way that a man can have 4 aghdi (permanently married) wives and infinite sighehi (temporarily married) wives. Many women imagine that their husbands are such good men that they would never do such a thing. However, paying a visit to the family courts shows that many husbands even at the expense of hiding it from their first wives unjustly use this “right by law”. This law along with the lack of possibility of divorce by women and the power in law that has been given to men have caused many problems in family relationships; with it’s extreme seen in the incidence of spouse-killings. Research that was done in 15 states of the country about spouse-killings has shown that 67 percent of women who have killed their husbands did this because their husbands were unfaithful to them, and 33 percent have committed the crime in retaliation for violence from their husband. Such outbreaks of unhealthy relationships occur as a consequence of current laws that are discriminatory and unable to formulate a relationship between man and woman in a humane and just way.

5. Age of criminal responsibility

The age of criminal responsibility for girls is 9 lunar years (8 years and nine months) and for boys is 15 lunar years (14 years and 6 months). Thus if a 9-year-old girl committed a crime, she will be treated just as an adult would be treated with all the penal laws (even execution) applicable to her. The only exception is that that child will be jailed or kept in a juvenile institution until she reaches the age of 18 years when the execution verdict can be carried out. It must be asked of lawmakers whether a child, who

is 9 years of age (or even after nine!), is wise and mature enough about her actions to take the life she is living away from her?

6. Citizenship

Citizenship is an important legal issue. In the current state of the world, citizenship has an important place; it determines the relationship between a person and the state, and determines the jurisdiction in which a person may marry, be punished, own property etc. According to the law of Iran, the citizenship of a woman does not transfer to her child. If your father is Iranian, you too are considered Iranian; but having an Iranian mother does not make you an Iranian citizen. This has caused many problems for women who marry Afghani men, for example. Their children are not considered Iranian, and therefore do not have the right to live in Iran. Research shows that around 20,000 children in Iran are without an identity card. These children do not have the right to live or go to school in Iran. The simple reason for this is that their mothers married their Afghan fathers without seeking the permission of the Interior Ministry, therefore their children are not citizens and lack identity cards.

In some cases a woman who marries a foreign man even loses her own Iranian citizenship.

7. Diyeh - Blood Money

Diyeh is the amount of money a murderer or one who has inflicted grievous bodily harm pays the victim or their family. In Iranian law, a woman's life is considered to be worth half that of a man. For example, if a brother and sister are hit by a car on the street, and both have both legs broken, the compensation the brother receives is double that of his sister. If they are killed, the money their family receives for the son is double

the money they would receive for their daughter. If a woman who is five months pregnant is in an accident and is killed, the amount of money paid for the woman is half that paid for the male fetus inside her.

8. Inheritance

According to civil law, after the death of the father and mother, sons receive 2 times as much in inheritance as daughters. If a man dies and has a wife and child, she inherits one eighth of her husband's wealth and if the husband has no child, the wife inherits one fourth of her husband's wealth. Having said that, women can never inherit land. If a man dies and has more than one wife, that same one-eighth or fourth portion gets divided between his wives.

However, if a woman dies and has a husband and child, the husband inherits a fourth of her wealth and if she has no child, the husband inherits half of her wealth. So in actual fact, a husband inherits twice as much as a wife does.

And more painful is that if a woman dies and has no inheritor other than her husband, her husband inherits all of her wealth. However, if a man dies and has no inheritor other than his wife, she inherits only one fourth of the price of his property and wealth. The rest of the money/wealth will belong to the government, meaning, the government is closer to that man than his wife with whom he has lived an entire life time.

9. Laws that support honor killings

Among the discriminatory laws, one can note the law that gives a man permission to kill his wife whenever he sees her in bed with another man and the law will not punish this man. This law in the hands of men has allowed men to kill women. As an example, 20 percent of killings in our country are killings with a motive related to unchastity and

sexuality. A research study about this has shown that 90 percent of the men who have killed their wives did it because of mistrusting their spouse and imagined offenses. When these men were asked whether they were sure of their spouse's infidelity, they all indicated that they were not absolutely certain about this and they had only suspected their wives. These men can say in court that their wife had been unfaithful to them (and her blood was wasted, so he had the right to kill her) and according to these laws they are exempt from the heavy punishment for their act. This means a man, who has only been doubtful of his wife, with the support of these laws, can get away with killing his wife. Regarding intentional killing of children, according to the law, a father and paternal grandfather will not be held responsible. For example, if a father kills his daughter for suspecting her (of corruption) or any other reason, he will be exempt from the standard punishment for murder, and the court can only sentence him to a maximum 10-year jail term.

10. Bearing Witness

There are some crimes women can not testify to, these include sodomy, homosexuality, prostitution and drinking alcohol. In the cases where a female witness is accepted, the testimony of two women equals that of one man, and usually if women testify to witnessing an incident it's not accepted unless at least one man also testifies.

Appendix B

Shirin Ebadi's Nobel Lecture**In the name of the God of Creation and Wisdom**

December 10, 2003

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Honourable Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel extremely honoured that today my voice is reaching the people of the world from this distinguished venue. This great honour has been bestowed upon me by the Norwegian Nobel Committee. I salute the spirit of Alfred Nobel and hail all true followers of his path.

This year, the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to a woman from Iran, a Muslim country in the Middle East.

Undoubtedly, my selection will be an inspiration to the masses of women who are striving to realize their rights, not only in Iran but throughout the region - rights taken away from them through the passage of history. This selection will make women in Iran, and much further afield, believe in themselves. Women constitute half of the population of every country. To disregard women and bar them from active participation in political, social, economic and cultural life would in fact be tantamount to depriving the entire population of every society of half its capability. The patriarchal culture and the discrimination against women, particularly in the Islamic countries, cannot continue for ever.

Honourable members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee!

As you are aware, the honour and blessing of this prize will have a positive and far-reaching impact on the humanitarian and genuine endeavours of the people of Iran and the region. The magnitude of this blessing will embrace every freedom-loving and peace-seeking individual, whether they are women or men.

I thank the Norwegian Nobel Committee for this honour that has been bestowed upon me and for the blessing of this honour for the peace-loving people of my country.

Today coincides with the 55th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; a declaration which begins with the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family, as the guarantor of freedom, justice and peace. And it promises a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of expression and opinion, and be safeguarded and protected against fear and poverty.

Unfortunately, however, this year's report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as in the previous years, spells out the rise of a disaster which distances mankind from the idealistic world of the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 2002, almost 1.2 billion human beings lived in glaring poverty, earning less than one dollar a day. Over 50 countries were caught up in war or natural disasters. AIDS has so far claimed the lives of 22 million individuals, and turned 13 million children into orphans.

At the same time, in the past two years, some states have violated the universal principles and laws of human rights by using the events of 11 September and the war on

international terrorism as a pretext. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 57/219, of 18 December 2002, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1456, of 20 January 2003, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights Resolution 2003/68, of 25 April 2003, set out and underline that all states must ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism must comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights and humanitarian law. However, regulations restricting human rights and basic freedoms, special bodies and extraordinary courts, which make fair adjudication difficult and at times impossible, have been justified and given legitimacy under the cloak of the war on terrorism.

The concerns of human rights' advocates increase when they observe that international human rights laws are breached not only by their recognized opponents under the pretext of cultural relativity, but that these principles are also violated in Western democracies, in other words countries which were themselves among the initial codifiers of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is in this framework that, for months, hundreds of individuals who were arrested in the course of military conflicts have been imprisoned in Guantanamo, without the benefit of the rights stipulated under the international Geneva conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the [United Nations] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Moreover, a question which millions of citizens in the international civil society have been asking themselves for the past few years, particularly in recent months, and continue to ask, is this: why is it that some decisions and resolutions of the UN Security Council are binding, while some other resolutions of the council have no binding force?

Why is it that in the past 35 years, dozens of UN resolutions concerning the occupation of the Palestinian territories by the state of Israel have not been implemented promptly, yet, in the past 12 years, the state and people of Iraq, once on the recommendation of the Security Council, and the second time, in spite of UN Security Council opposition, were subjected to attack, military assault, economic sanctions, and, ultimately, military occupation?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to say a little about my country, region, culture and faith.

I am an Iranian. A descendent of Cyrus The Great. The very emperor who proclaimed at the pinnacle of power 2500 years ago that "... he would not reign over the people if they did not wish it." And [he] promised not to force any person to change his religion and faith and guaranteed freedom for all. The Charter of Cyrus The Great is one of the most important documents that should be studied in the history of human rights.

I am a Muslim. In the Koran the Prophet of Islam has been cited as saying: "Thou shalt believe in thine faith and I in my religion". That same divine book sees the mission of all prophets as that of inviting all human beings to uphold justice. Since the advent of Islam, too, Iran's civilization and culture has become imbued and infused with humanitarianism, respect for the life, belief and faith of others, propagation of tolerance and compromise and avoidance of violence, bloodshed and war. The luminaries of Iranian literature, in particular our Gnostic literature, from Hafiz, Mowlavi [better known in the West as Rumi] and Attar to Saadi, Sanaei, Naser Khosrow and Nezami, are

emissaries of this humanitarian culture. Their message manifests itself in this poem by Saadi: "The sons of Adam are limbs of one another, having been created of one essence". "When the calamity of time afflicts one limb, the other limbs cannot remain at rest".

The people of Iran have been battling against consecutive conflicts between tradition and modernity for over 100 years. By resorting to ancient traditions, some have tried and are trying to see the world through the eyes of their predecessors and to deal with the problems and difficulties of the existing world by virtue of the values of the ancients. But, many others, while respecting their historical and cultural past and their religion and faith, seek to go forth in step with world developments and not lag behind the caravan of civilization, development and progress. The people of Iran, particularly in the recent years, have shown that they deem participation in public affairs to be their right, and that they want to be masters of their own destiny.

This conflict is observed not merely in Iran, but also in many Muslim states. Some Muslims, under the pretext that democracy and human rights are not compatible with Islamic teachings and the traditional structure of Islamic societies, have justified despotic governments, and continue to do so. In fact, it is not so easy to rule over a people who are aware of their rights, using traditional, patriarchal and paternalistic methods.

Islam is a religion whose first sermon to the Prophet begins with the word "Recite!" The Koran swears by the pen and what it writes. Such a sermon and message cannot be in conflict with awareness, knowledge, wisdom, freedom of opinion and expression and cultural pluralism.

The discriminatory plight of women in Islamic states, too, whether in the sphere of civil law or in the realm of social, political and cultural justice, has its roots in the patriarchal and male-dominated culture prevailing in these societies, not in Islam. This culture does not tolerate freedom and democracy, just as it does not believe in the equal rights of men and women, and the liberation of women from male domination (fathers, husbands, brothers ...), because it would threaten the historical and traditional position of the rulers and guardians of that culture.

One has to say to those who have mooted the idea of a clash of civilizations, or prescribed war and military intervention for this region, and resorted to social, cultural, economic and political sluggishness of the South in a bid to justify their actions and opinions, that if you consider international human rights laws, including the nations' right to determine their own destinies, to be universal, and if you believe in the priority and superiority of parliamentary democracy over other political systems, then you cannot think only of your own security and comfort, selfishly and contemptuously. A quest for new means and ideas to enable the countries of the South, too, to enjoy human rights and democracy, while maintaining their political independence and territorial integrity of their respective countries, must be given top priority by the United Nations in respect of future developments and international relations.

The decision by the Nobel Peace Committee to award the 2003 prize to me, as the first Iranian and the first woman from a Muslim country, inspires me and millions of Iranians and nationals of Islamic states with the hope that our efforts, endeavours and struggles toward the realization of human rights and the establishment of democracy in our respective countries enjoy the support, backing and solidarity of international civil

society. This prize belongs to the people of Iran. It belongs to the people of the Islamic states, and the people of the South for establishing human rights and democracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the introduction to my speech, I spoke of human rights as a guarantor of freedom, justice and peace. If human rights fail to be manifested in codified laws or put into effect by states, then, as rendered in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human beings will be left with no choice other than staging a "rebellion against tyranny and oppression". A human being divested of all dignity, a human being deprived of human rights, a human being gripped by starvation, a human being beaten by famine, war and illness, a humiliated human being and a plundered human being is not in any position or state to recover the rights he or she has lost.

If the 21st century wishes to free itself from the cycle of violence, acts of terror and war, and avoid repetition of the experience of the 20th century - that most disaster-ridden century of humankind, there is no other way except by understanding and putting into practice every human right for all mankind, irrespective of race, gender, faith, nationality or social status.

In anticipation of that day.

With much gratitude

Shirin Ebadi

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