

# CHIC RESISTANCE

Women, Fashion, and Politics in Iran

Shirin Abdmolaei





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عوانتي زير اش مسام قوانيني  
Women Living Under Muslim Laws  
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين  
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

# **Chic Resistance: Women, Fashion, and Politics in Iran**

Author: Shirin Abdmolaei

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## About Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is a feminist international solidarity network with a mission to effectively advance women's equality, gender justice, and women's human rights through a variety of channels; providing information, research and analysis, training workshops and conferences, as well as facilitating a transnational and intergenerational collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam.

The network started in 1984 by nine women from Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Iran, Mauritius, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Pakistan who came together and formed the Action Committee of Women Living Under Muslim Laws in support of local women's struggles. Since then WLUML has linked individual women and organisations and now extends to more than 70 countries ranging from South Africa to Uzbekistan, Senegal to Indonesia and Brazil to France. It links:

- Women living in countries or states where Islam is the state religion, secular states with Muslim majorities as well as those from Muslim communities governed by minority religious laws;
- Women in secular states where political groups are demanding religious laws; women in migrant Muslim communities in Europe, the Americas and around the world;
- Non-Muslim women who may have Muslim laws applied to them directly or through their children;
- Women born into Muslim communities/families who are automatically categorised as Muslim but may not define themselves as such, either because they are not believers or because they choose not to identify themselves in religious terms, preferring to prioritise other aspects of their identity such as political ideology, profession, sexual orientation or others.

**What is in the Name:** Our name **challenges the myth** of one, homogenous 'Muslim world'. This deliberately created myth fails to reflect that laws said to be Muslim vary from one context to another. The laws that determine our lives are from diverse sources: religious,

customary, colonial and secular. Many different laws simultaneously govern us: laws recognised by the state (codified and uncoded) and informal laws such as customary practices, which vary according to the cultural, social and political context.

WLUMML, as a network, has opted for an open structure which has been designed to maximise the participation of diverse and autonomous groups and individuals as well as collective decision-making. WLUMML does not have formal membership and networkers are a fluid group of individuals and organisations who maintain regular two-way contact with the network. For more information please see the WLUMML website at [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org).

**What are WLUMML's mission and focus?** Its mission is to strengthen women's individual and collective struggles for equality and their human rights, especially in Muslim contexts. It achieves this by breaking their isolation, by providing trainings, and by creating and reinforcing spaces for women to share experiences and lend support to one another. This support is created by making linkages between women within Muslim countries and communities, and with global feminist and progressive groups. In this way WLUMML promotes the creation and strengthening of both local and transnational women's movements.

**Publications, Research, and Media:** WLUMML conducts research, maps various analyses, mobilizes knowledge through the organization of training workshops, conferences, launch campaigns, circulates information regarding women's diverse experiences and strategies in Muslim contexts and helps to demystify the diverse sources of control over women's lives. It also runs the Feminist Leadership Institute for women in Muslim contexts. WLUMML's current focus is on the four themes of: fundamentalism and identity politics, peace building and resisting the impact of militarisation on women's lives, promoting and protecting women's equality under laws, particularly family laws, and sexuality and women's bodily autonomy. Violence against women, as a theme, cuts across all of WLUMML's projects and activities. Its publications are primarily in English, French, Arabic (and some in other local languages based on the need assessments and in response to the request from activists on the ground) are freely available on the website at [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org). Networkers also translate information into numerous other languages. There are also printed versions of our selected

publications, some of which are available on Amazon and other virtual bookstores.

**Collective Research for Action and Training Projects and Coalition for Women's Human Rights:**

- Exchange programme (1988)
- Mothers of Algiers (1987-1993)
- Qur'anic interpretations meetings (1990-2004)
- Women and Law in the Muslim world programme (1991-2001)
- Women's Reproductive Rights (1993- 1998)
- Vienna Tribunal Campaign (Women's Rights are Human Rights) (1991- 1995)
- Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institutes (1998, 1999, 2007, 2009)
- Gender, Militarization and displacement in Muslim contexts (1999 2002)
- Initiative for democratizing Afghan Family Laws – INSAF (2002 - present)
- Dress Codes and Modes: Politics of Women's Clothing in Muslim Contexts (2003 – Present)
- [The International Coalition on Women Human Rights Defenders, http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org) (2005 – present)
- [The Feminist Dialogue, http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org) (2006 - present)
- [The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women!](http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org) (2007 - present)
- Violence is not Our Culture Campaign, <http://violenceisnotourculture.org/> (2009 to present)
- Women reclaiming and re-defining cultures: Asserting rights over body, self, and public spaces (2008-2011)
- Gender Equality Program (2008-present).



- Women's Empowerment and Leadership Development for Democratization (2012 to present)

### **International Coordination Office**

PO Box 28445, London, N19 5NZ, UK

Email: [wluml@wluml.org](mailto:wluml@wluml.org)

Website: [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)

The International Coordination Office (ICO) facilitates coordination between networkers.

### **Asia Coordination Office**

Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre

PO Box 5192, Lahore

Pakistan

Email: [sgah@sgah.org.pk](mailto:sgah@sgah.org.pk)

Website: [www.shirkatgah.org](http://www.shirkatgah.org)

## **Dress Codes and Modes: Politics of Women's Clothing in Muslim Contexts**

WLUML publications, including their annual journal Dossiers are meant to support the struggle for women's equality and autonomy, and the promotion of women's human rights worldwide. They are also intended to provide information about the lives, struggles and strategies of women living in diverse Muslim communities and countries while making the accumulated knowledge and experiences of women's rights movements accessible to a wide readership, as aids to activism for creating a more equitable world. They aspire to provide a collective transnational and intergenerational space to share experiences, strategies, analyses and initiatives.

The Dress Code and Women's Bodily Autonomy Program was launched as a means of widening the debate about Women's Bodily Autonomy and sexuality, a major area of the WLUML Concerns from its inception. WLUML's research and documentations has made it amply clear that woman's body is the site of many social, cultural, religious, legal, and political struggles. In the name of religion – be it Islam, Christianity or many other religious beliefs – or in the name of cultural purity and tradition, women have been subjected to discriminatory practices, codes of conduct and laws with the ultimate goal of controlling their sexuality and excluding them from public life. These practices and laws constitute and reinforce insidious forms of violence against women. Dress code has also been a powerful tool of political struggle in various parts of the world but in particular in Muslim contexts since the 20th century.

The goal of the WLUML Dress Code and Women's Bodily Autonomy Program has been to develop new tools of analysis through exploring, mapping new avenues and sharing strategies initiated in different communities and by women activists to claim their rights and exercise control over their bodies as well as minds. It examines the various means by which women resist and subvert their marginalization from public life and public spaces.

The dress code program and publications have intended to explore and map new avenues to support women’s initiatives to resist control of their bodies and sexuality. This program has produced a considerable number of workshop sessions and has contributed substantially to other WLUML programs. It has also produced a dress code exhibition that since early 2003 has successfully travelled to many parts of the world. The program and various research projects developed under this program has produced many articles and book chapters as well as several books, some of which have been published by WLUML and yet others have been published by mainstream publishing houses (in English or other languages, see table below). Many of the other research reports and articles dealing with politics of dress codes in Muslim contexts have been published as articles in the various Dossiers: Journal of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and other book chapters. There are also several other books and articles in the pipeline which will be published as they are completed.

### **WLUML Exhibition: Dress Codes & Modes - Women’s Dress in Some Muslim Countries and Communities**

(<http://www.wluml.org/node/2663>)

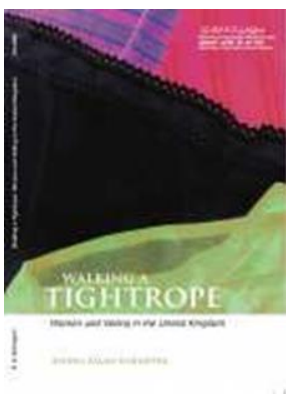


This exhibition looks at the diversities and commonalities of women’s dress through space and time, highlighting the influence of many forces – class, status, region, work, religious interpretation, ethnicity, urban/rural, politics, fashion, climate etc. Dress codes are one of the crucial elements which contribute to the construction of a ‘Muslim’ identity by both local and international forces operating from within Muslim societies as well as from outside Muslim contexts. By now the well-traveled exhibition celebrates both the diversity as well as similarities and our histories. The exhibit

is comprised of 20 large printed panels focusing on women’s clothing in Muslim contexts generally, and then in 7 specific countries and regions:

Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Northern Nigeria, South Asia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It uses 250 images (paintings, drawings, photos), past and present, and over 85 quotations from a rich variety of sources plus some explanatory original text. The diverse life size panels indicate the diversity, commonality and evolution of women's customs in Muslim contexts through space and time. Recording the changes in dress that have and continue to take place within various Muslim contexts has a political meaning particularly in more recent decades when state and non-state actors are using force and violence to impose them on women and sometimes on men too in order to enforce a particular form and brand of identity. (If you would like to know more about the exhibition or would like to display it, please contact [wluml@wluml.org](mailto:wluml@wluml.org))

**Walking a Tightrope: Women and Veiling in the United Kingdom**  
by Ayesha Salma Kariapper (2009) [hEp://www.wluml.org/node/5756](http://www.wluml.org/node/5756)



This book examines the ways in which public debates over the headscarf and the full-face veil have shaped the strategies of women from Muslim communities particularly in the UK and Europe. It examines strategies developed to deal with the limitations imposed on them in the name of religion, culture, tradition and identity within their ethnic community, and with racism and exclusion from mainstream society. This book is based on field research in the United Kingdom, and review of legal structures facing women in Muslim communities in other European countries. The purpose of this field research-based study was to examine the various, sometimes oppositional debates within Muslim communities on issues of Muslim women's dress codes and document the experiences and analyze the implications of veiling practices for women living in a multicultural society.

**The Complete Collection of the Dress Code Laws and Decrees Under Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-2009), By Shadi Sadr 2010 (Published in Farsi)**



Iran went through a liberalization of dress code and banning the veil and chador (a cape form of garment which envelopes women head to toe except their face, hands and feet) and promoted European fashion in 1936 in the name of modernity. The state employed police and other state machinery to impose the new dress code in the name of ‘modernity’ and women’s liberation. However, in 1979 a sudden U-turn occurred of imposing a very restrictive dress code in the name of ‘Islam’. The very frequent justification of these laws is that the sight of women not fully covered distracts men as they cannot control their sexual desire, and this creates social disorder! Women’s resistance to dress code has presented a major challenge to the state. Thus, to insure its application of the Islamic dress code the regime employed the national police force, as well as the newly introduced moral police and other state machinery and vigilantes to impose the new dress code. State has introduced severe consequences for the women who resist the new dress code regulations. The women’s resistance and refusal of state denying them the very basic rights of what they may choose to wear forced the state to continuously revise and develop new laws and strategies to insure women’s compliance with this draconian law. Shadi Sadr, an attorney and women’s right activist has undertaken the monumental task of collecting the various laws in a 236 page book. This book is witness to women’s refusal to be bullied to comply and the state insistence to control their bodies and present them as obscene and a source of social disorder. The book is also intended to facilitate various research in the area of sexuality and dress code in Iran as it is not easy to have access to these documents for those who are unfamiliar with the varieties of rather complex legal systems in Iran.

**Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restriction and Resistance**  
**Edited by Anissa Helie and Homa Hoodfar (2012)**



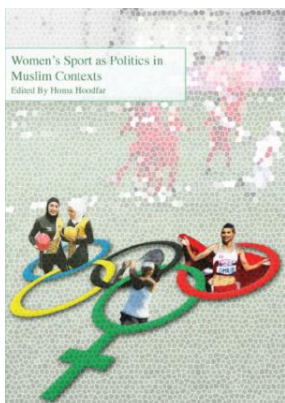
The impulse for this book came out of a multi- country research on Women's empowerment in Muslim contexts that WLUML and several of its partners conducted, focusing on indigenous strategies. Clearly issues of sexuality including dress code and gender segregation beamed large in all countries involved in this project. The book provides a new and much-needed angle to the study of sexual identities, rights, and women's citizenry in Muslim-majority societies. The collection of essays goes beyond the vexed and reductionistic "western vs authentic"

dichotomy and maps the various ways that women in diverse Muslim communities have exercised and developed indigenous strategies to resist the restriction imposed on them in the name of religion and cultures. Several chapters in this book deal with dress codes while others deal with various aspects of sexuality. This volume should be praised for its ability to widen our understanding of how hegemonic norms of sexuality and sexual behaviour are challenged and contested by diverse actors across religious, secular and sexual orientations. A crucial book for scholars of gender, Islam, rights and sexuality.

## **Women's Sport as Politics in Muslim Contexts**

**Edited by Homa Hoodfar (2015)**

<http://www.wluml.org/resource/womens-sport-politics-muslim-contexts>



In many Muslim contexts dress code and obscenification of women's body has been used as a tool to exclude women from the public life and public spaces. This volume through focused case studies, tracks the many sophisticated, context-specific, and constantly evolving strategies of resistance deployed by women to overcome the social and legal barriers that intend to exclude them from public life including sport both as players and spectators. The edited volume evinces the various ways women negotiate political and ideological boundaries as they politicize

and subvert spaces normally considered outside the realm of state politics in order to bring about gender equitable opportunities while at the same time redefining women's roles in society. In short, the book provides a glimpse of the variety of ways that women debunk exclusionary masculinist logics in sports that are justified by nationalism, religion, and modernism. Hoodfar and her colleagues contribute a ground-breaking analysis of the landscape of gender and sport in diverse Muslim contexts, covering Saudi Arabia, Iran, UK, Europe and North America, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Senegal.



## Acknowledgement

I am grateful for the support I have received since I began researching dress codes and women's clothing in the context of Iran in 2012. I thank the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University in Montréal for offering me the opportunity to explore this subject in greater depth as a graduate student. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Homa Hoodfar. If it were not for her intellect, patience, and support over the last several years, neither this research nor this book would have been possible. Along the way she also introduced me to the WLUML Program on *Dress Codes and Modes: Politics of Women's Clothing in Muslim Contexts* that not only validated the importance of the politics of dress codes but also I benefited from the various research documents that was produced in this program. Moreover, I would like to thank Dr. Marc Lafrance and Dr. Setrag Manoukian, whose insightful comments on my thesis as a master's student were very useful to writing this book. Thank you to my family, friends, my partner Daniel, and my mom and dad for their love and support. Finally, I would like to thank the women who participated in this study.

## **About the Author**

Shirin Abdmolaei is a doctoral Candidate in the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario (London, Ontario). Shirin holds a master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology from Concordia University (Montréal, Quebec) and a bachelor's degree in Anthropology from York University (Toronto, Ontario). Her research interests broadly include sexual violence in higher education, the politics of clothing in nationalist contexts, and gender and sexual politics in North America and the Middle East. Her research has been published in journals such as *Anthropology of the Middle East* and *Anthropologie et Sociétés*. She is a co-editor of the book, *Women, Islam, and Education in Iran* (2019, New York: Routledge).

## Introduction: Going to Iran

My family fled Iran when I was less than a year old. Settling in Canada, the country would become home to thousands of Iranians who sought to flee the same social repression and political turmoil as my parents and relatives; a diaspora which was forced to create a sense of home for themselves outside of Iran. Restaurants, bakeries, and markets selling Persian goods and delicacies quickly opened up soon after the increase of migration of Iranians to Canada throughout the 1980s and '90s, which was followed by Persian music concerts, art shows, movie festivals, and Iranian language plays, even make-shift *bazaar's* and festivals celebrating *Norouz*, the Persian new year. This establishment of Iranian culture, which has been successfully integrated into the multicultural streets of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal, now stands as a testament to the resilience and strength of first generation Iranian-Canadians in light of the trauma and violence of revolution, religious fundamentalism, war, forced migration, refugee status, welfare, racism, and leaving behind nearly everything they possessed and knew for a new life in a country thousands of miles away from the only life they had ever known.

It was within this diaspora and the extensive stories told by my family and relatives that the culture of Iran I had experienced outside of it was strikingly different than the country I had heard stories about. Weaved and pieced together by their narratives, I listened as they reminisced about their participation in a bloody and violent revolution with hopes of collectively attaining a democratic Iran. Stories of the shock they experienced when the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was eventually seized by Islamic fundamentalists, who ordered the execution of thousands—including their friends and colleagues—within the first few weeks of the new Islamic Republic. Stories of them being imprisoned for their leftist and oppositional politics, and the subsequent torture they experienced while in prison. I listened to my mother and my aunts speak about the reversal of women's rights, evident through forced veiling and Islamic dress codes. I heard stories of the

extensive surveillance of their everyday lives in which they were incessantly under the gaze of the new Islamic regime's policing forces. Music, dancing, and parties, which they enjoyed with relative freedom before the Revolution, and which had been so essential to Persian culture, could now only be enjoyed in the privacy and secrecy of their homes. My family and others in diaspora would reminisce about the eight-year long war with Iraq, which began in the city of Ahvaz, where I was born, where they lived in constant panic as they heard bombs drop and watched helicopters crash into city streets, bearing witness to the rising number of civilian casualties, which included their neighbours, friends, co-workers, and relatives. To escape this increasing sociopolitical oppression, chaos, and fear, I listened to their endless stories of having to find ways to escape Iran through forged passports, bouncing from one country and continent to the next, sleeping in airports and refugee housing, often with their small children, all in search of asylum.

The Iran I had envisioned was, to say the least, repressive and violent. It was a country where any sense of fun was forbidden, where people were strictly controlled, and where women were oppressed. Sensationalized media coverage, too, helped solidify my impressions of the religious fanaticism of the Iranian people, as mobs of radicalized men and *chador*-clad women, who in their long black clothes, which left only their round faces visible, chanted *death to America* in unison; an image which, in a post 9/11 era, continues to mark the threat of political Islam and the ferocity of the Middle East.

Yet the 2009 Iranian uprisings, known as the Green Movement, following the disputed presidential elections which afforded a second term to conservative hardliner, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, painted a radically different portrait of the Iran that most of us in the West, including those of us in the diaspora, had about the country. Crowds of Iranians chanting religious slogans perpetuated by Western media since the Iranian Revolution were replaced by chants of protest against the Islamic regime, while the uniform bodies of religious women who wore the *chador* were replaced with women whose green veils—the colour of the movement—only partially covered their hair, as they protested alongside men. Well over

one million Iranians joined together in the largest demonstration against the Islamic regime since the establishment of the Islamic Republic exactly three decades earlier.

It was through the pictures and videos of women participating in these demonstrations that the world was forced to recognize Iranian women—not as the *chador*-clad, oppressed, passive, subservient, religious fanatics they had come to be known as—but as decisive subjects at the forefront of seeking sociopolitical change. They were subject to violence, and even death, at the hands of the police, *basiji* forces, and ordinary pro-regime supporters while defiantly marching through the streets of Tehran; holding hands, raising their fists up in the air as a symbol of strength and determination, while holding banners and singing songs of protest. The participation of women in the Green Movement was perhaps an awakening to people around the world, even to those of us in the global Iranian diaspora, that Iranian women were resilient. Standing in defiance alongside men, we watched as women defied a totalitarian theocracy who had been obsessed with regulating them and remaking them into pious Muslim women—obedient, docile, and submissive to men—since 1979. It was some time after the events of the 2009 uprisings that I grew more curious about Iran. Two years later, and nearly twenty-one years after my family fled the country, I returned.

To say the least, I experienced a combination of excitement and anxiousness upon my return to Iran. Thoughts of what would happen if my veil accidentally slipped off, if my clothes didn't follow appropriate dress codes, or if I laughed in public were generally on my mind, and I wondered if it was okay to wear shoes that exposed my painted toe-nails, or if I could hug my uncles and male cousins who greeted us at the airport. These feelings intensified during the last remaining moments before arriving at Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport.

After confirming to passengers that our KLM flight would be landing shortly, the pilot reminded travelers of the Islamic Republic's mandatory Islamic dress codes, informing female passengers to dress accordingly before departing the aircraft. The shuffling and moving of bodies quickly

commenced soon after. Before changing into my own attire that I had stashed away in my carry-on, I was distracted by a young woman who sat across the aisle. She quickly and promptly transformed herself within minutes. The clothes that had donned her body in a myriad of colours were slowly replaced with darker shades. Her arms that had remained visibly bare for the duration of the flight had been covered, and her flowing hair came under the shield of a veil. My excitement of returning to Iran was overshadowed by anxiety once my own transformation of appearance began. The army-green dress shirt that fell just above my knees and the grey veil that rested upon my head quickly took an effect on my overall state. Being dressed in such a combination of colours was depressing, but they were the non-provocative colours that the Islamic Republic expected, I thought. The tight veil that wrapped around my neck furthered the uncomfortable and nervous state that I was progressively merging into, which was compounded by the radically altered ambience of the flight. A whole new set of women appeared to have replaced the ones that had first filled the seats around me when we boarded the flight in Amsterdam.

The next day, all the feelings and concerns that I had on those last remaining moments of the flight immediately disappeared as I observed the dressed bodies of young women as I walked along the urban streets of Tehran for the very first time. Women boldly accentuated their bodies as they adorned themselves in a mix of chic Iranian fashions, traditional Persian styles, Eastern prints, and familiar Western designs. Their clothes were tighter than I expected, much more colourful, and their tops were often visible as their unbuttoned *manteaux's* acted as jackets. Their hair, coloured, highlighted, and styled, remained visible as their veils acted merely as an accessory. In their high heel shoes, open-toe sandals, and Converse high-tops, many of the faces that passed me were covered with lipstick, eyeliner, eyeshadow, and blush.

Although the 2009 uprisings portrayed a new representation of Iranian women, I didn't realize the extent to which women were altering their clothes and appearances. Yet as I was surrounded by Iranian women dressed in unconventional attire, they strikingly juxtaposed religious and political propaganda that had been superimposed across the urban

landscape of Tehran. Women defied public signs reminding them to follow state-mandated dress codes, and didn't appear to be too bothered by *basiji* forces who patrolled the streets for dress code violators. It was during this trip to Iran and my observations of women in public that women's clothing became something much more than mere material for me.

Having received a bachelor's degree in Anthropology just a month prior to my trip, the new fashions which challenged official state dress codes of black *chadors* and plain *manteaux's* became a point of anthropological curiosity for me, as my interest in both feminism and women's rights grew as well. While I was eager to find out why women in Iran were wearing such attire in a context where dress codes were strictly enforced by the state, and having been accepted into a graduate program in Montréal with the intention of studying it, I was, nonetheless, caught between wanting to learn more about this phenomenon and trying to justify the relevance of studying women's clothing. Does clothing really matter? Is it worth any significant social analysis? What does clothing have to do with human rights anyway? Aren't fashion and beautification anti-feminist? Aren't there more important things to examine in light of women's rights in Iran? as many conventional leftist scholars kept reminding me.

But feminist literature also reminded me that the body is a significant site of contestation, action, and protest. When women engage in norm-breaking bodily practices, even through the use of clothing, it is often done so in an effort to challenge their bodily subordination and victimization (Pitts 1998; Davis 1997). So I began to ask more reflective questions in light of the history of women, as well as men, who have utilized clothing as a form of social and political resistance, from European women who fought a long hard battle to wear pants (Crane 2000, Torrens 1997), to the Black Panthers in the United States who adopted a certain self-presentation to promote their revolutionary agenda with aims to provide equality and freedom to African Americans (Cheddie 2010), to the subcultural resistance styles of working class British punks (Hebdige 1979). So, I thought, can the new dressed appearances of Iranian women be a tool of resistance against the Islamic regime? Are Iranian women critiquing the patriarchal codes of morality and docility that the Islamic Republic has forced on them through

compulsory veiling? Are their new fashions a sartorial rejection of the regime's discourses regarding women? Are they using clothes to shape and assert their own identities in a society where homogeneity is expected?

Having had the opportunity to pursue my graduate studies under the supervision of Professor Homa Hoodfar, Homa's shared interests in the politics of clothing and women's rights in the Middle East helped resolve any concerns I had about the relevance of studying women's clothing in Iran. Reading works by scholars such as Diane Crane (2000) and Joanne Entwistle (2000), who each provide in-depth historical reviews and social analyses of the sociology of women's clothing, also helped me realize that clothing has long been of historical and social value, telling us much about social control, social organization, social and political citizenship, and women's rights. It took me only a short period of time to realize that clothing invites us to ask more questions than we often think, and it has the potential to open up a vast space for social analysis and critical inquiry into the social and political realities of women which we often tend to overlook. As my research on women's alternative fashions in Iran would prove, dress has the potential to deepen and extend our analysis of pressing issues relating to women's realities while exposing it as a significant channel of resistance and contention in any given society. The study of dress, Emma Tarlo asserts, "can reveal much about society, history, politics, culture, and...the way in which people seek to manage and express their own identity" (1996:1).

Iran is a fruitful context to explore and understand the social and political significance of clothing to both the state and to ordinary women. Since 1979, when the Islamic Republic was established, the move to veil women was quick and swift—although not without resistance. But the veil was made compulsory, and the leaders of the Islamic Republic, well aware of the communicative power of clothing, utilized dress codes as a means to both accelerate their Islamization of Iran and to regulate women—politically, socially, and physically. Yet as much as the Islamic regime has tried to utilize dress codes as a powerful social and political aesthetic, women have too realized the symbolic nature and communicative power of dress to express and assert a new image of themselves; an image far different from what the regime expects of them.



Yet since the very first pronouncement asking Iranian women to veil soon after the Revolution, women have resisted and have pushed the limits of what is acceptable to wear through various phases of resistance; from mass demonstrations against veiling, to questioning the relevance of wearing a *chador* or black colours by using Islamic texts, to slowly flirting with new styles, such as wearing jeans under their long *manteaux*. Little by little, women managed to get away with challenging dress codes, which helped pave the way for a new social and cultural phenomenon which we see today on the urban streets of Iran, which I have termed ‘alternative fashion’. In the last decade, more and more urban middle class Iranian women have adopted vibrant colours and an array of styles and fits in their public presence, strikingly challenging the banality and uniformity of the black veil (Abdmolaei 2014).

Despite the exhaustive measures and efforts undertaken by the regime to deprive women of their individual identities in an effort to subject them to a unified, collective Muslim order and to remake them into good Muslim women—the veil meant to be an emblem of this—the rise of alternative fashion has emerged as a response to the state’s repressive gender and sexual discourses that have been literally weaved into the fabrics of the Islamic regime’s dress codes. By neither fitting into the Islamic nor Western model of femininity, Iranian women are proclaiming themselves as independent persons as they observe alternative fashion, which are neither conventionally Islamic nor Western, while they access the contentious Iranian public space (Abdmolaei 2014). By refashioning their bodies, they are resisting state-foisted discourses of women in their public and private presence as a way to attain autonomy over their own identities and bodies; an assertion of independence from oppressive social, political, and patriarchal forces.

However, in the eyes of the clergy and religious establishment in Iran, women who wear alternative fashion are perceived to be threatening the morals of Iranian society, and have been described as “evil animals”, “corrupting influences”, and a “cultural invasion” (Jafari 2007:369). Besides arresting women, fining them, and subjecting them to the harsh treatments of the morality police, the regime has gone to great lengths to condemn and

mock women who wear alternative fashion. Women who choose to wear clothes that do not follow dress codes are characterized as being weak, have low self-esteem, and have mental health issues, while they are also depicted as having character flaws. Note these posters below:



“Fashion: those who suffer from weak self-esteem and lack of beliefs try to make themselves more appealing to others with fashion so they can hide their weaknesses” (Source: <http://imgur.com/a/JqG1V>)



“Psychologists say: those who dress inappropriately and use lots of make-up have character issues” (Source: <http://imgur.com/a/JqG1V>).

Yet regardless of how the veil has been used to regulate women in Iran, and regardless of these insulting measures taken on part of the regime to ostracize and condemn women who choose to wear alternative fashion, many academics still find clothing in the context of Iran to be irrelevant, while others claim that it is an elitist material item. While discussing the significance of women's alternative fashion in Iran with some leftist intellectuals, including Iranian-Canadian feminists who have lived outside of Iran for several decades, those with leftist tendencies often quickly dismissed the role of clothing on the basis that it is a material, consumer item. Some denounced fashion as a class issue, which only the economically privileged could partake in, while others claimed that women who wear these new fashions only do so to attract men.

Other criticisms have been that Iranian women who adhere to such fashions lack intellectual understanding of dress codes, and their use of clothing holds no real basis as a form of resistance. The notion that fashion is a *bourgeois*, arrogant, and trivial consumer item, not to mention only used to attract the male gaze—the very discourse that the regime uses to denounce women who do not adhere to appropriate dress codes—obscures the significance of its use in women's efforts to resist patriarchal codes and their sociopolitical positionings in their struggle for autonomy and sociopolitical rights. As we have seen in the history of the evolution of women's clothing in contexts such as France, Britain, and North America, fashion and women's rights have almost always gone hand-in-hand (Crane 2000, Kriebel 1998, Torrens 1997, Freedman 1986).

Feminist theory and literature have also argued that when women engage in “norm-breaking bodily practices,” they do so with the intention of challenging their bodily subordination and victimization (Pitts 1998:68). It is in this context that Kathy Davis would agree with me, that women who wear alternative fashion are “using their feminine body as a site for action and protest rather than as an object of discipline and normalization” (1997:33). Failing to consider the use of alternative fashion in Iran only undermines women's everyday actions to subvert a system and reshape an instrument which has been used to control and further subordinate them over the course of the last four decades.

Moreover, women and youth in societies such as Iran, where conventional democratic avenues of resistance have been denied, have learned to devise and develop unique approaches to resistance, what Assef Bayat (2010) calls 'everyday' challenges to oppressive state policies. These 'everyday' acts of resistance work towards achieving more immediate and personal satisfactions which affect their daily lives rather than operating under a banner of grand ideologies and collective action. Of course, there have been considerable initiatives and achievements of many well-organized social movements in Iran, especially the women's movement, which have made significant progress for Iranian women, and whose members have been relentless in their challenge against oppressive, patriarchal laws since the establishment of the Islamic Republic (See Hoodfar 2008, Paidar 1995). But organized resistance has also shown to be difficult, compelling ordinary citizens to develop alternative strategies to assert their opposition and work towards more immediate social change.

In the case of Iran, for example, such alternative strategies have included the persistent actions of women sitting in parks, interacting with men in public spaces despite official sex-segregation policies, and wearing alternative fashion, all of which have been critical to asserting women's public presence. These very acts, although perhaps mundane and ordinary to those of us outside of Iran, have in fact considerably helped women defy the regime's expectations of them—as women who are to be bounded to the home and outside the realm of public visibility and participation (Hoodfar and Ghoreishian 2012). While not political or organized in the conventional ways that we approach resistance, common actions among Iranians have helped challenge social norms and rules, considerably redefining the location of women in the Iranian public space (Also see Abdmolaei 2014).

Nonetheless, similar to organized collective action, there are repercussions for subversive and norm-breaking actions. For those who wear alternative fashion, the government continues to put measures in place to regulate women, which has often resulted in state administered morality police verbally and physically abusing and arresting women for their attire. But as observed elsewhere, unlike organized movements which often come under

the threat of being dismantled and its actors prosecuted, once certain acts such as wearing alternative fashion are observed by more and more people, it cannot be easily regulated, either, despite measures used by the state to prevent it.

In speaking of everyday acts of resistance, which emerge as what James C. Scott terms the “hidden transcript,” Scott notes that this form of resistance becomes a “silent partner in a loud form of public resistance” (1990:199). Alternative fashion has thus emerged as a critical form of silent, everyday resistance against the Islamic regime, as women use fashions inspired by Western, Indian, Turkish, and traditional Persian costumes as an everyday act of defiance and opposition to the ideological image that the regime has devised for them. As women refashion their bodies in new styles and an array of colours and fits—neither fitting into Islamic or Western forms of appearance, but something of their own unique making—they posit a silent yet deafening social, political, and ideological challenge, not only to the regime’s excessive hold and control over them, but to the entire national endeavour of the Islamic Republic, which depends so much on their veiled bodies.

## **The Research**

It is within this context that this book will examine and discuss the politics of clothing in Iran; from its role as a political institution to its function as a contentious yet potent means of resistance in the hands of women. Besides my field research spanning from my travels to Iran, following Iranian fashion blogs, and visiting an array of visual sites documenting Iranian fashion, I also conducted in-depth interviews with Iranian women living in Tehran, as well as in Toronto, Montréal, and Berlin who were between the ages of 23 to 35, and had been living abroad for one to six years. I also had informal conversations with Iranian women between the ages of 40 to 63 who live in Tehran as well as Toronto, who recounted their initial experiences of the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the introduction of dress codes in 1979. The comments of women who participated in this study and lived

outside of Iran, and who had time to reflect on the subject of dress codes and fashion, were particularly helpful to my analysis of the data.

This book is not meant to be an exhaustive overview of Iranian fashion, or the history of dress reform in Europe and the Middle East, or even an in-depth exploration of alternative fashion in Iran. I am an anthropologist interested in how clothing has been used in a multitude of contexts; as a political tool, as regulatory apparatus, and as a means of oppressing women on part of the state. I am also interested in how women have used clothing to achieve further social rights and access to their bodies—a subject which has not been closely or seriously examined in Iran. As I hope to show in this book, clothing has been utilized as both a political instrument by the state as well as a weapon in the hands of women who have used the same materials to resist. I do not claim to provide a complete story of alternative fashion in Iran, but my goal is to bring attention to the deeply political nature of clothing in the hands of the Islamic regime, and to seriously consider the role of alternative fashion as a new avenue of resistance in Iranian women's struggles for more freedoms and social rights—which women are partaking in more than any other form of resistance in the country. I thus hope to situate alternative fashion as part of women's wider efforts to expand their rights in Iran. I hope that this book will be useful and accessible to students, scholars, and those outside of academia, to read and engage with, and to seriously consider that clothing does matter.

The first chapter of this book outlines clothing as a political institution. Chapter two focuses on a historical overview of the politics of women's dress in Europe and North America, and how dress had been historically utilized by women to gain social and political rights and freedoms throughout nearly two centuries. Chapter three examines the politics of the veil vis-à-vis nation-building contexts in the Middle East and North Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Chapter four will focus on the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the implementation of dress codes. This chapter will also delve into women's initiatives to resist the veil through different phases of resistance. Chapter five will focus on alternative fashion as a form of resistance against the Islamic regime and patriarchal

control, and how alternative fashion are being used to assert autonomy and self-identity.

## Chapter 1

### Clothing as a Political Institution

To speak about dress is to speak about bodies. Shaped by cultural and social forces (Mauss 1973), the body is acted upon by culture, social structures, social norms and rules, as well state regulations of individuals in order to transform them into subjects, Foucault would remind me. Approaching the dressed body through a Foucauldian lens, my extensive university readings of Michele Foucault (1995) lent itself nicely to my analysis of clothing, where I began thinking about how, as a political tool and discourse, it can be utilized to discipline the body; acted upon by social forces to impress upon it a specific meaning. Although rarely acknowledged, history and contemporary examples have shown that dress is a fundamental instrument of regulation, and the dressed body is unquestionably a site of ideological contestation within the dynamics of power, discipline, and state control. As Anthony Synnott reminds us, “the body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenologically, and a cultural product; it is personal and also state property” (1993:4).

While the relationship between clothing and the state has had a very long and lengthy history, the link between the two has surprisingly been often overlooked. Academia has not really given it due attention, either.<sup>1</sup> But clothing has long been a potent political device, utilized to remake populations, regulate the citizen-populace, transform cultures and habits,

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<sup>1</sup> While feminists and other political and social forces had long been using clothing as an important avenue to promote their movement, interest in the study of dress and its relationship to politics, nation-building, and has only recently become a subject of academic inquiry and interest (See Parkins 2002).



while it has also been used as a means to “civilize” and modernize. This certainly was the case of clothing for European colonial officials and Christian missionaries during the era of imperial expansion. Believing they were part of a hegemonic, civilized, and more superior culture, European clothing was coercively enforced on colonized peoples in order to convert them to their own notions of decency and morality—often violently, and almost always in the name of Christianity. Deemed as savages and backwards, Africans, Native Americans, indigenous peoples, and Muslims (both directly and indirectly), were expected to wear European dress in so to not only rid themselves of—if not to save themselves from—their native cultures and traditions, but to adopt the supposed civilized manners, habits, and bodily decorum of Christian Europeans (Rovine 2009, Allman 2004). European dress, then, was imagined to be a powerful apparatus that could aid in reforming the so-called uncivilized—both inside and out.

In nation-building contexts across Western and Eastern nations, clothing has worked in a similar manner; used as a potent method to attain political and nationalist goals with the intention of remaking populations. In such contexts, clothing has been used as a means to rid the civic body of aesthetic differences and appearances that challenge state ideology in order to solidify and depict a uniform, national civic body (Mahmoun 1998). Without having to directly regulate citizens by force or through violent tactics to make citizens obedient to the state, as a visible public marker, clothing has been assumed by governments to have the potential to remake citizens; convinced of the power of clothing as an aesthetic that has the potential to shape people’s personal beliefs, ideologies, and values. It was expected that clothing can in fact make individual citizens feel part of the nation and, in turn, convince them to pledge loyalty to the will of the state. Perhaps Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi says it best, that leaders have had an extreme belief in the “power of aesthetics over ideology” (2002:151). That is, the belief that in order for a government to maintain control over the citizen-populace, they must invest their energies in regulating the dressed body of ordinary people in order for citizens to directly tie into, comply with, internalize, and eventually become part of the nation.

Perhaps one of the more well-documented uses of clothing as a political institution has been the role that the black shirt played in forming and fortifying Benito Mussolini's Italy in the 1930s; a significant example of how clothing and political power fused together. As part of his 'aesthetic political project', the black shirt—a sign of fascist faith and expression of obedience to Mussolini's regime—was donned by Italian men with the intention of remaking them into "new men" and "citizen-soldiers."<sup>2</sup> Having complete faith in the power of style and aesthetics, Mussolini was convinced that changing the dressed body could simultaneously transform one's character and beliefs, too. The black shirt was intended to both masculinize and discipline the wearer's body while transforming them to the point where they would be ready to sacrifice themselves for the cause and ideological foundation of fascist Italy (Falasa-Zamponi 2002).

Following the Revolution in 1949, Chinese officials also used uniform dress codes to assert an appearance of sameness in their drive to fortify communist China. Unlike other nations which made distinctions between men and women, and used clothing to separate the two genders in nation-building contexts such as revolutionary France and Iran, the leaders of communist China argued that the oppression of women and inequality between the sexes existed only in *bourgeois* societies. Having found power in clothing, Chairman Mao Zedong, founder of communist China, implemented the Mao suit, which consisted of a jacket and pants, and was meant to produce the appearance of sameness, equality, and uniformity among the Chinese; standing as a symbol of proletarian unity. The Mao suit had to be worn by all Chinese people, and was available in select colours of navy, khaki green, and grey. Women were restricted from wearing makeup and jewellery, and had to wear their hair short or bobbed, which helped solidify the image of homogeneity among citizens produced by aesthetic similarities. This was intended to not only blur gender differences, but to also eliminate visible disparities of class, age, occupation, and status. To ensure that citizen's followed dress codes and did not observe anything

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<sup>2</sup> The Black Shirt was also the name of a squad that would violently attack members of socialist and leftists organizations. Its members wore black shirts.

Western or *bourgeois*, the Red Guards were established to patrol and police citizens, helping to successfully implement China's aesthetic political endeavour. Heavily influenced by the power of aesthetics, clothing participated in creating new socialist citizens to help strengthen communist China (See Chen 2001, Finnane 1996).<sup>3</sup>

As the examples above show, when dress is forced from powerful actors such as the state, it ultimately works to erase the individual body (O'Neil 2010, Chen 2001, Ribeiro 1988, Fisher 1979). In doing so, the body becomes subjected to the political establishment which has enforced itself upon the construction and regulation of that body, expecting the dressed subject to conform to the ideologies which are invested in the attire. When imposing dress codes on a subject to meet political or ideological endeavors, we can understand clothing as playing a critical role in the dynamics of discipline as it is one way in which the body becomes compliant while simultaneously helping to represent the state's ideologies (Crane 2000, Graybill and Arthur 1999).

Although the above cases could be argued as extreme examples of fascist and communist regimes who excessively regulated individuals and deprived its citizens of autonomy, the regulation of citizen's dressed bodies has been a historically significant—although often understated—dimension of the social and political schema of modern European and North American societies as well, particularly as it pertains to women. Since at least the French Revolution (1789-1799), during which dress codes functioned as a political tool in the making of the modern French state, we can see how clothing has been assembled as a political institution which has helped aid the making and remaking of national and cultural identities, political boundaries, and social hierarchies—all the while sustaining a gendered social system, which has always been part and parcel to nation-building and always fundamental to the organization of power within a given society, including Western democracies (Crane 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, there was a gradual relaxation of dress codes

We even continue to see the importance of dress as a political institution in contemporary Western contexts as well, although in recent times state initiatives to regulate dress have focused predominately on the battle over Muslim women's veils, particularly in France and Québec (See Abdmolaei and Hoodfar 2018, Conway 2012, Scott 2007, Ardizzoni 2004).<sup>4,5</sup> In both nationalist contexts, the veil had been described in state discourse as a marker of difference and one which does not subscribe to the supposedly democratic values of the West. Both states argued that the veil disrupts the national narrative of France and Québec, fracturing the values of their societies, including gender parity and women's rights.

These recent examples of the political initiative to ban the veil in France and Québec has helped shed light on the significant role that clothing continues to play in political contexts and within the nationalist endeavour. We see that when clothing is adopted as a political institution, clothing functions with the intention of suggesting which bodies can and cannot be part of the broader civic body, and which bodies can and cannot represent the nation. In other words, how citizens dress is vital to the value and representations of both the state and society, and women have often been the targets of such initiatives. As we will see in this book, state regulation of dress has worked to dictate and regulate what expressions of gender are socially and moralistically acceptable in a given society, especially in regard to women—who continue to be subject to regulation and control if their dressed bodies are deemed problematic, in both democratic as well as theocratic societies.

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<sup>4</sup> In an effort to enforce secularization, other religious garments such as the Sikh turban, the Jewish kippa, and overly large cross necklaces were included in the ban, but the debates largely focused on the Muslim veil or *hijab* (head covering) and *niqab*

<sup>5</sup> The veil was banned in French public schools in 2004, followed by ban on the *niqab* from all public spaces in 2010. The Charte des valeurs québécoises in 2013 (Québec Charter of Values) did not legally actualize, and there was no ban on the veil. In other more recent cases, Belgium banned the *niqab* in 2017.

## **The Politics of Clothing in Iran and the Emergence of Alternative Fashion**

In Iran, the politics of clothing has had a very long and contentious history, where the reformation of women's dressed bodies has been fundamental to different phases of nation-building and accelerating state ideology, which began much earlier than the Islamic Republic. The twentieth century alone watched as Islam and the state regulated women's bodies to the veil at the turn of the century, which was followed by modernity and secularization forcefully unravelling them when, in 1936, the veil was banned by the Pahlavi monarchy. And religious fundamentalism re-veiled women in the name of morality and Islam under the Islamic Republic only four decades later. As a major symbolic political resource, the dressed bodies of Iranian women have been utilized by various regimes throughout the past century to help shape, represent, and accelerate the every-changing sociopolitical landscape of Iran.

The 1979 Revolution, known as the Iranian Revolution or Islamic Revolution, was the outcome of several decades of mobilization by Iranian men and women who were eager to oust a dictatorial, pro-Western Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. His father, Reza Shah Pahlavi, had legally banned the veil from public spaces and encouraged women, as well as men, to adopt European and Western modes of dress. Although Islamic study circles gained popularity during the revolutionary fervour, attracting high numbers of Iranian youth, the secular women who wore the veil as an emblematic form of resistance against the Westoxification<sup>6</sup> of the Pahlavi monarchy during the demonstrations against the Shah did not actually intend on making the veil obligatory. Nor did they desire a theocratic government to take over Iran. It was expected by many Iranian revolutionaries that the future of Iran would be democratic, and even if Islamic, they believed it would be free of Islamic law (Paidar 1995). Women were convinced that this

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'Westoxification' was initially used by Jalal Al-Amhad. The term refers to a "euphoric intoxication and poisoning by the West" (Moallem 2005:76). Al-Amhad's work influenced Khomeini's revolutionary discourse (Varzi 2006:8)

was the case given that Ayatollah Khomeini, who would become the Supreme Leader of Iran following the success of the Revolution, assured women that their social and political demands would come to fruition with his government. Convincing women that the Iran he would govern would include women who were educated and constructive social members, women were promised their rights under his regime. Khomeini was quoted saying:

As for women, Islam has never been against their freedom. It is, to the contrary, opposed to idea of woman-as-object and it gives her back her dignity. A woman is a man's equal; she and he are both free to choose their lives and their occupations. But the Shah's regime is trying to prevent women from becoming free by plunging them into immorality. It is against this that Islam rears up. This regime has destroyed the freedom of women as well as men (quoted in Betteridge 1983:118).

And in terms of the clothes women chose to wear, Khomeini had stated that "[w]omen are free in the Islamic Republic in the selection of their activities and their future and their clothing."<sup>7</sup> Yet within only a few days of the Revolution, the regime rid women of many of the social and political rights they had won under the Pahlavi monarchy. Soon after, they commenced on their mission to regulate women's clothing, which was among the new regime's first political and imperative moves. Women of all ages starting from the age of puberty were expected to wear Islamic dress codes, which consisted of either a long-black *chador* or a long *manteaux* and a veil at all times in public—regardless of religious background.

In the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the enforcement of the veil and Islamic dress codes has been intertwined with the dynamics of power and discipline. On one hand, as a nationalist project, enforcing the veil on women was an attempt to represent the newly founded Islamic Republic, where inscribed on the bodies of Iranian women rested the spirit of a new nation. Coercively veiled in dark, neutral colours, women's dressed bodies

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with *The Guardian* in Paris (6 November 1978) (See [http://www.mideastweb.org/Middle-East-Encyclopedia/ayatollah\\_khomeini.htm](http://www.mideastweb.org/Middle-East-Encyclopedia/ayatollah_khomeini.htm))

were intended to be a reflection of a homogenized, disciplined Islamic whole where individuals ceased to exist as the dark veil displayed on women's bodies produced a visual appearance of unity. A symbolic means of displaying and representing a new devoted Islamic body politic, the success of the Islamization of Iran was meant to be both celebrated and symbolized by the veiled bodies of women.

On the other hand, dress codes have worked as a highly repressive tool of regulation in the hands of the Islamic regime, which has aimed to restrict women's bodily mobility, limit their social and legal opportunities and freedoms, and to weaken their socio-political rights. The veil was meant to forcefully and often violently remake women into pure, righteous Muslim women according to the regime's understanding of Islam, where women were to be obedient to men, sexually submissive, docile, and outside the realm of public participation and visibility (Afary 2009, Sedghi 2007, Moallem 2005).

Yet as women discard old symbols invested in the Islamic Republic's veil and refashion their bodies anew, Iranian women wearing alternative fashion are using the same materials and fibers to refashion the very bodies and assert the very selves that the regime has worked so vigorously to control in their efforts to produce proper, obedient, docile, and submissive Muslim women and a collective Muslim citizenry. By recontextualizing, redefining, and refashioning the dress codes of the Islamic Republic, women are resisting the regime and patriarchal control as they replace old symbols with new meanings in their efforts for greater rights. Similarly, the politics of women's clothing in Europe and North America, as we will see in the next chapter, demonstrates not only the political significance of dress on part of the state, but the significance of dress to women's resistance efforts, where women adopted dress reform and new fashions as an initiative to assert their autonomy and their desires to open up avenues for their citizenship and public participation.





## Chapter 2

### **The Politics of Dress, Gender, and Resistance in Europe and North America**

*What do you mean clothing is a political tool? How can clothing regulate people? Are clothes really a useful way for women to challenge the government and social norms?* were questions I was often asked when describing my research on the politics of clothing in Iran to colleagues, friends, leftist scholars, and those curious. Largely assumed to be trivial, the possibility that clothing could be of any serious value to the state, the organization of society, or to the resistance efforts of women was lost on them, and I eventually grew accustomed to their puzzled expressions and blank stares. Yet when I brought up how the veil and compulsory Islamic dress codes have been used by the Iranian government as a means to regulate women, most of those who had initially questioned the validity of clothing as a state apparatus were quick to see the connection between clothing and social control.

Of course, this had much to do with the fact that this specific example was based on a repressive Islamic country, where the imposition of the veil in the Western imaginary has been reduced to a patriarchal culture keen on oppressing women. The case of Iran in contemporary times is perhaps an obvious and palpable example of how state-enforced dress codes work to regulate women, especially given the post 9/11 era we live in, where fanatical, oppressive Islam has been characterized as anti-women (not without justification), with the veil signifying this. To those who I engaged in discussion with, state regulation of dress was apparently only exclusive to repressive theocratic regimes like Iran, despite my efforts suggesting that

clothing has long been utilized as a decisive—not to mention oppressive—tool of control in many societies—Western societies included. Not only had dress been historically adopted in Europe and North America to achieve social, political, and nationalistic objectives, I would explain, but it continues to be used in such contexts as a critical instrument to regulate women. In fact, I would tell them, women living in the West have had a long history of struggle against state-enforced dress codes, including social norms, which have dictated the rules of women's dressed bodies in an effort to control women's gender expressions, limit their social and political rights, and restrain their public presence and participation.

Indeed, the implementation of Islamic dress codes in Iran since 1979 has been critical to regulating what spaces women have access to, how they can express themselves, and what social and political rights they can possess. As a communicative tool and form of representation, dress codes were meant to remake Iranian women from the outside-in; refashioning them as new Muslim women. Undoubtedly, the politics of clothing in Iran has ignited my intellectual curiosity regarding the pivotal relationship between clothing, nation-building, and social control. But the essentialized views of those who I discussed my research with, who only saw clothing as a tool exclusive to Islamic theocracies, or did not see the value of studying dress, drove me to further explore the politics of women's dress and fashion vis-à-vis nation-building and state control in contexts beyond Iran and other Muslim majority countries.

In this chapter I hope to help bring your attention to the significant relationship between clothing and nation-building, as well as clothing and social control, which have, in one way or another, been part and parcel to the reasons for implementing dress codes in totalitarian and democratic contexts. To erase markers of difference, to modernize, to make chaste, to discipline, to make equal, or to make compliant to the state and, not to mention, obedient to the laws of God, policing bodily aesthetics has been a significant way of regulating the body politic, and particularly women, while pursuing political and state initiatives.

As I will illustrate in this chapter, the regulation of dress has been an essential means for which Western contexts have sustained gendered hierarchies and fixed gender norms. Aware of this, and recognizing how certain modes of dress and social codes were used to oppress women, limit their bodily mobility, and to weaken their political and social participation, European and North American women found power in clothing as a channel for asserting their social and political rights. They utilized dress reform and various evolutions of fashion to challenge social norms of gender and to expand their social and political citizenship, beginning from at least the French Revolution to well throughout the twentieth century. As I will discuss in this chapter, and in the case of Iran throughout the rest of this book, women, in the face of conservative, patriarchal, and religious regulations and backlash, have challenged dress codes and social norms, and have adopted clothing and fashion as a way of claiming autonomy, as well as social and political rights.

### **Clothing, Gender, and Social and Political Citizenship**

Dress is a critical point in the interplay between gender and citizenship. While men have historically been subject to state dress codes given their historical presence and acceptance in the public sphere, the regulation of their clothing had often been for the purpose of enriching the male body with political power (Çinar 2005). Women, however, have long been victims of formal and informal state mandated dress codes. In both Western and Eastern contexts, the female body has been metaphorically employed as symbolic of the nation, responsible for upholding and preserving the nation's identity, values, morality, and subsequently, male honour.

The relationship between gender and clothing has been part and parcel to the nation-building process, as well as to the organization of modern society, precisely because dress in the modern era has been imperative to the production and reproduction of gender and gender relations, where men and women have had to assume different roles. Dress has also helped to subordinate women in the hierarchal schema of a given society, which has deprived women of their rights and access to socio-political citizenship

and participation in public space. We only have to look to the rich body of historical documentation showing that for at least the last two centuries, women's dress in Western contexts has been subject to extensive state control, police intervention, public condemnation, social stigmatization, and harassment, which have all deprived women of having access to equal social and political citizenship as men (Vaughan 2009, Strassel 2008, Parkins 2002, Crane 2000, Kriebel 1998, Torrens 1997, 1999, van Slyke 1993, Roberts 1993, Banner 1983). This may come as a shock to the common Western belief that regulating women's bodies is solely exclusive to Muslim contexts, but the evolution of women's fashion, particularly in France, England, and the United States, is arguably the most significant example of how clothing has been central to the regulation of women's bodies, sexualities, social and political rights, and their gender performances than anywhere else in the world.

A historical analysis of women's clothing is essential to understanding the correlation between clothing, the state, gender, citizenship, and nation-building. But an overview of the evolution of women's dress in France, England, and the United States, which also unfolded in other places across Europe, as well as in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, also allows us to see the significance of clothing as a potent tool in the hands of ordinary women themselves. Aware of the calculated and intentional use of dress as a tactic to control women, women went through various phases of contesting discriminatory policies and social norms by challenging dress codes in order to open up new spaces of political contestation over the course of two centuries. By doing so, women were able to make considerable advances to their citizenship rights and access political and social spaces historically reserved for men, all the while negotiating and challenging the bounds of traditional gender norms and gender identities.

### **Clothing and the Making of the Modern French Republic**

The correlation between fashion, politics, and citizenship was significant during the French Revolution (1789-1815), where the advent of modernity began, and where modern fashions had larger cultural and social

implications as the French appropriated dress to communicate and embody the new democratic ideals of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. Prior to the Revolution, the French elite and aristocracy possessed the social, economic, and political power to wear extravagant clothing, where they showed their wealth and authority through high fashions, jewellery, large flashy hats, and large silhouettes not available to other social sectors. Yet fashion transformed as freedom, egalitarianism, and fraternity became the ideals of a new France. There was a growing sentiment among revolutionaries that the nation had to move away from the symbols adorned by the aristocracy, and men and women alike argued for the democratization of clothing. Subsequently, cotton came to replace silk, in so the rich and poor could wear the same materials, and darker colours, less embroidery, and less expensive materials were adopted. Men were also eager to wear new clothes that provided them with greater bodily mobility. Dress thus became intertwined and directly involved with the revolutionary politics of France as people outside of the elite strata wore new costumes, badges, and insignias to communicate their political allegiance and challenge to the absolute rule of King Louis XVI (Wrigley 2002), while many French citizens wore red, white, and blue—colours of French nationalism.

Clothing during the revolutionary fervor was also utilized by women as they responded to the new values and demands of French society which they sought to be a part of. A simple white dress, which was high-waisted and made of sheer muslin, as Naomi Lubrich (2016) describes, was a sartorial embodiment of France's democratic ambitions; liberating in a physical sense, egalitarian because the colour and cut women wore were similar and unvarying, and it was modest—fraternal—as opposed to the individualized ostentatious dresses of the aristocracy. Women were urged to show their patriotism by wearing more native fabrics.

Women's clothing during this period also marked the beginning of modern notions of dress and fashion as an expression of self-identity, as women adopted clothing styles that were denied to them in the realm of a masculinized public sphere of politics. As Eileen Ribeiro, perhaps the most prominent historian of fashion and the French Revolution, claims,

[w]ith the French Revolution came for the first time, intrusive politics, a greater awareness of class differences, and a restless need for change and for self-expression—all ideas which were to be reflected in dress, the most sensitive of social barometers (1988: 19).

Nonetheless, there were many discussions during this revolutionary period regarding the limits of women's clothing. Women did not have the right to dress like men, nor could they wear pants, and laws were set in place to make it illegal for women to do so given that pants were considered a masculine aesthetic.



**'In the Gardens of the Tuileries, Year VII – 1799' by Francois Courboin**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:In the Gardens of the Tuileries, Year VII - 1799.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:In_the_Gardens_of_the_Tuileries,_Year_VII_-_1799.jpg)

The woman in yellow wears a typical hat that the aristocracy wore prior to the French Revolution, with a silk ribbon wrapped around her waist. The woman in pink wears a simpler hat made from cotton, a style and fabric that gained popularity following the Revolution.

## **The Evolution of Women's Clothing in Europe and North America**

Historically, a woman's place in the nation-state and gendered social scheme of Europe and North America was reflected by the dresses she was expected to wear. Victorian dress, worn predominately by upper-middle class women in Britain and British colonies between the 1830s to the 1900s, was a cumbersome style, making it difficult for women to move and to be agile. Such fashions sartorially visualized women's inferior positions in the gendered social organization of nineteenth century Europe and North America; visually positioning them as the weaker sex who were dependent on men for protection. Consisting of a physically tight and restricting corset, with a long, heavy balloon skirt, Victorian dress exemplified the norms of proper bodily decorum and public presentation which helped foist the idealized feminine body women were to personify through their dresses: modest, behaved, submissive, and attractive (Torrens 1997, 1999, Banner 1983). As the restrictions of their dresses physically exemplified the limits they experienced as women, who had little, if any, role in public or political life, Victorian dress symbolized the limited positions that women and girls were reduced to: caring mothers, compliant daughters, and passive wives who had to be secluded and confined to the domain of domesticity, and whose public visibility was only for the companionship of men.

The visibility of British women in public—regardless of the constricting nature of their attire, and despite their subjugated positions in England—emerged as symbols of modernity in comparison to the veiled and hidden bodies of Muslim women for many Middle Eastern reformers during this period, which I will delve into further in the next chapter. But it is important to note that to many Muslim women, Victorian dress was anything but liberating. In fact, Victorian dresses baffled them, and they actually felt sorry for British women who had to wear such tight, constricting, and heavy dresses, and insisted that European men kept their wives and daughters in dresses that resembled cages (See Mabro 1991). Although we have gotten used to learning about how Europeans have historically observed non-Europeans, we very rarely hear about how non-Europeans perceived Europeans, especially through the lens of women.

Although the origins of dress reform in Europe may have begun during the French Revolution, it gained momentum in the nineteenth century as women's political and social demands increased. Admitting to the physically excruciating, tormenting, and debilitating pain Victorian dresses bestowed on women, women and health reformers helped kickstart dress reform by claiming that Victorian dress caused a number of health issues for women, including complications during child birth (Kriebel 1998, Warner 1978). It was in this context that women's rights advocates began to see value in dress reform, and started linking the constraints of Victorian dress to their lack of opportunities to partake in leisure activities and athletics while limiting their access to public spaces. As an impediment, women argued that Victorian dresses were not only physically immobilizing, hindering their physical power and bodily mobility, but it denied women their social and political power, too. Although this movement began in England, it expanded elsewhere and overseas to places such as the United States and Canada, where women began to insist that changes to their clothing could simultaneously pave the way for them to attain both access to the public domain as well as claims to their own autonomy (Torrens 1999).

For women who began to mobilize under the banner of women's rights, dress reform emerged as a practical—although contentious—step towards liberation. The first reform dress appeared by three leading American women's rights activists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Elizabeth Smith Miller, and Amelia Jenks Bloomer in 1851, which came to be known as the Bloomer Dress or Bloomer Costume. Consisting of a loosely belted tunic and Turkish pantaloons (which women in the Middle East had long been wearing at this point), with a knee-length skirt over their full-length trousers, the Bloomer Dress offered women more freedom to move about with more comfort and ease, and to partake in leisure activities such as cycling (See Jungnickel 2018).





**Bloomer Dress**

(Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bloomer.gif#/media/File:Bloomer.gif>)



**Amelia Bloomer wearing the Bloomer Dress**

(Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amelia\\_Bloomer.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amelia_Bloomer.jpg))

Yet in societies governed by strict social and religious norms of Christianity, women who wore Bloomer Dress in public, and later those who wore cycling pants, were subject to criticism, ridicule, and harassment by the police as well as male and female onlookers. Horrified by the idea of women wearing pants (although women in China, Malaysia, and across the Middle East had been already wearing pants at this point), the conservative public thought the “dividing of the legs of respectable women with a layer of fabric seemed like a sexual sacrilege,” and they perceived pants to be immodest, a sexual blasphemy, and against the laws of God and Christianity (Hollander 1994: 53 *in* Torrens 1999:83). Stirring up cultural and religious fears, and social and moral panics, adopting a ‘masculine’ clothing item such as pants was considered by the conservative public as an “attempt to usurp male authority” (McCrone 1988: 221 *in* Crane 2000:122), or even worse, women were actually trying to become men! In a society regulated by orthodox norms of Christianity, which influenced the rigid sartorial separation of men and women, women in pants, something so common and perhaps trivial today, only less than 150 years ago was assumed to be going against God and the laws of nature (Crane 2000). Contesting Victorian dresses and corsets, which maintained women’s upright, attractive figures—perceived to be a necessary emblem for a well-ordered society—was rattling the moral structure of society.

Increasing public backlash, harassment, and violence by the public kept many women from adopting dress reform, and some, who had once believed in the cause, stopped wearing Bloomer Dress all together, worried that it might detract support for their demands for equal citizenship. Susan B. Anthony, for example, a prominent American women’s rights activist, who once wore the Bloomer Dress, gave up on dress reform and argued that women must achieve legal equality with men before devoting their efforts to dress reform. Yet dress reformers, who recognized that the oppression of women was deeply weaved into the very attire they were coerced to wear, argued that reforming women’s clothing should be the first step women needed to take in order to achieve legal equality (Torrens 1997). Women recognized comfortable dresses as decisive tools that women needed in order to both reform and use to their advantage in their efforts

to attain social and political citizenship (Crane 2000, Nelson 2000, Fischer 1997, Sennet 1976).

Despite this resistance to restrictive Victorian dresses, Edwardian fashions in 1900 still adhered to the need for attractive dresses, and followed the image of the Gibson Girl, which was an ideal of femininity and sophistication, in which the corset flattered women's bosoms. Yet various women's rights movements and unions, such as the Edwardian English Suffragette Movement and the Women's Social and Political Union, found power in Edwardian dresses as a tool of political contestation. As they threw rocks and smashed windows during demonstrations demanding women's rights, English Suffragettes strategically continued to wear their fashionable, colourful dresses and hats as they partook in political dissent. By drawing attention to their dressed bodies which adhered to the social codes of English femininity, while engaging in "unfeminine" actions of protest and resistance, Suffragettes intentionally drew attention to their bodies to demonstrate that women can be political subjects without having to give up their femininity (or trying to become men), as conservatives who were against women's rights and dress reform often argued (Parkins 2002).

Women faced considerable social ridicule for their protests, and were condemned as manly, "unfeminine freaks" who were not the women and mothers of England (Crane 2000:127). Yet English Suffragettes pushed the use of dress to achieve their political and legal rights beyond mere dress reform, the latter of which aimed to challenge the prominence of Victorian dress in favour of the Bloomer costume and other more comfortable styles. By utilizing their dressed bodies to engage in political contestation, women managed to use dress to challenge the image and discourse of the possibilities and social positions of women, and to expand the boundaries of political participation and citizenship.

For others, adopting male fashion norms, such as wearing trousers, coats, vests, and top hats were intended to challenge patriarchal customs and to expand women's sphere of power and opportunity which were legally

denied to them.<sup>8</sup> Observing clothes traditionally worn by men was also used by women with the intention of challenging traditional notions and presentations of femininity, and to increase their sense of authority, to experience more adventure, and to broaden their professional opportunities (van Slyke 1993). Women also found that wearing clothing reserved for men helped them escape the oppression, abuse, and sexual harassment they often experienced at the hands of their husbands, fathers, and men in public.

By the start of World War 1 (1914-1918), the second phase of dress reform came to fruition, marking the beginning of a new century of social change where women would come to work in the labour force in higher numbers, form a number of social and political unions, graduate from college, and white women in England and the United States would eventually win the right to vote by 1920.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on the changes that were rapidly unfolding, there was a strong conviction among women that their clothes had to be comfortable and sensible as their mobility and activities outside of the home expanded. Women began wearing clothes which reflected the new realities of their public lives.

Although women had already begun wearing pants in private settings by this point, the first World War replaced men with women in factories, and women preferred to wear trousers and overalls instead of dresses during work hours. Enjoying the comfort of trousers and the physical freedom pants afforded them, women were reluctant to give up wearing pants once men returned from the War. It was not until the late 1800s to early 1900s that women were permitted to wear trousers, and it was only allowed if

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Edwards Walker, a well-known dress reformer and Civil War surgeon began her advocacy for women's rights with dress reform. Although she was arrested in 1866 for "disorderly conduct and appearing in male costume," she continued to wear men's clothing until her death in 1919 (Kriebel 1998:29-30).

<sup>9</sup> Women were granted the right to vote in Canada by province. While most provinces would grant white women the right to vote between 1916-1922, women couldn't vote until 1940 in Quebec. English women won the right to vote in 1918, but it was not extended to all women over the age of 21 until 1928. White American women won the right to vote in 1920.

they were holding onto bicycle handlebars or riding horses. But French designer Paul Pairet, one of the first pants designers for women, designed loose fitting, wide-leg trousers called harem pants for women in 1913, which were inspired by Middle Eastern cultures—ironic considering that European and Middle Eastern reformers during this period considered Muslim women’s clothing practices to be backwards and traditional, which I will delve into further in the next chapter (Rovine 2009, Ewing 1989). Although the French Revolution’s ideals of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* were idealized and celebrated by French women who had a central role in the Revolution, women remained second-class citizens, and laws were set firmly in place to regulate their dressed bodies, even after a Revolution which aimed to democratize both fashion and society. Nonetheless, French women challenged official French laws while wearing trousers in public—a law which was not actually overturned until 2013! Women observing pants had aroused cultural fears of gender mixing and sexual impropriety in Europe and North America, as we saw with the public’s reaction to the Bloomer Dress. But Coco Chanel, a French feminist designer keenly aware of the significance of dress as both a communicative aesthetic and a tool for women to gain greater access to and, participation in, public life, introduced pants to her fashion line. Chanel also adopted other conventional masculine styles, such as ties, collars, and long tailor-cut jackets to express female power, liberation, and women’s authority (Roberts 1993).

At the same time, young American women and college students also began observing shorter skirts and shorter hairstyles, as the appeal of sexual attractiveness weakened the bounds of traditional femininity dictated by social norms and state laws in the 1920s (Van Cleave 2009, Kriebel 1998, Hall 1972). So did the iconic flapper women, whose clothing covered less skin, was more flirtatious and sexual, and pushed the limits of not only social dress codes, but the possibilities of womanhood as flapper dresses stood as a sartorial representation of youthful energy and feminine independence (Kriebel 1998). Yet flapper women rung the alarm for the conservative American public. Arousing public ridicule, women were condemned for their low-cut dresses, short skirts, and the ways they used (and disused) the corset, and for influencing the clothing styles and attitudes of ordinary

women who were eager to assume a new modern lifestyle. This included a rejection of motherhood as the only role for women, their desire for economic independence, and more involvement in politics. This conservative backlash to sartorial changes was also put into laws and public restrictions. As the necklines of bathing suits were lowered, and women's arms and legs were uncovered more, cities enacted laws and codes regulating what bathing suits women were permitted to wear at beaches and swimming pools, and historical pictures document police officers measuring the length of bathing suits. Those who failed to meet appropriate measurements or exposed too much skin were arrested.<sup>10</sup>



**Flapper woman**

(Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alicejoyce1926full\\_crop.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alicejoyce1926full_crop.jpg))

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<sup>10</sup> To see photos of women getting arrested for inappropriate bathing suits, or having the length of their bathing suits measured, see <https://mashable.com/2015/05/27/swimsuit-police/#zHvgO.t3ygq7>

Between their greater public participation in institutions of higher education, politics, the workforce, entertainment, and in everyday leisure activities which placed them in public visibility, more and more women refused to be defined by and tied to traditional social mores of womanhood and femininity. And the more educated and financially independent they became, the more they pushed for their social and political rights, which women conveyed through the adoption of dress styles which were strikingly less covering, less heavy, and less constricting than prior decades. Although women were able to access public spaces and work in the labour force at even higher rates while men were off at war again during the second World War 2 (1939-1945), by the end of the War and the return of men from abroad, there was a reinstatement of traditional notions of the nuclear family and static gender norms. Although women continued to work, many were returned to their so-called rightful place in the home. We can look to women's clothing in the post-war era to see how gender ideologies and social codes changed and were reflected on women's dressed bodies.

Christian Dior's 'New Look', which consisted of a shirtwaist and skirt, was meant to serve as a post-war "refeminization" of white women (Maynard 1995 in Brickell 2002), where women were encouraged to keep up with social standards of female modesty while maintaining their sexual attractiveness for their husbands—keeping in line with the religious Christian mores of their society (similar to what many Islamic ideologues, notably Iranian and Saudi Arabian states, insist upon). Consisting of a full-skirted silhouette and underwired bustier, the New Look functioned as a new discourse of femininity and motherhood, which was reinforced by the media, magazines, American television shows, consumerism, and the myth of the nuclear family, which helped secure and reinstate strict gender divisions. The magazine, *Good Housekeeping*, would proclaim that with the New Look women were "going to be ladies again. We're going to be feminine, with greater accent on our tiny waist, fuller hips, higher heels..." (Vaughan 2009:29). Clearly, it was no longer simply the force of law or ordinary members of the public who were regulating how women should dress and act, but various social and media propagandas and manipulations participated in returning women to traditional femininity, where they were

to occupy the domestic sphere and rely on men for social and economic survival.

However, as has been the case throughout the evolution of women's dress in the West, it is not surprising that many women challenged the New Look and the image it was meant to represent given the drastic social and political progress made to women's lives. By the 1960s and the rise of second-wave feminism, American women—and not just white women—challenged and criticized the relevance of having to follow standards of beauty perpetuated by consumerism, religion, and social norms as they questioned the fabrics of American society in a period of social and political turmoil, and rising social consciousness among women and men alike (See Friedan 1963).

## Conclusion

For at least the last two centuries, the dressed female body in the West has been a site for social and political dispute and struggle, where women, through different phases, in places such as France, England, and the United States, recognized the symbolic power of clothing as a key indicator in the struggle for liberation and the expansion of their political and social rights (Strassel 2008). In this chapter, I hope I have helped to shed some light on how clothing has been utilized as a tool of social control and regulation over women's bodies historically in Western contexts, and how women utilized dress as tools of resistance. But my intention with this chapter has been to show that women's dressed bodies are almost always a response, and work in accordance with, new symbols that are gradually adapted as social roles and social structures change alongside women's social and political realities. As Torrens reminds us, "[s]tudying dress reform adds not only to historical knowledge, but demonstrates the intricate connection among social reality, social control and symbolic expression of gender through clothing" (1997:190).

Women's dress and its continuous evolution illustrates the key role that their dressed bodies continue to play as a site of dispute and contention over the performance, articulation, and expansion of gender norms and



performances, including women's rights, appropriate bodily decorum, and sexuality. Women have always found power in dress to resist and challenge their subordinate social and political circumstances and realities, and the politics of women's dressed bodies continues today, even in an age of women's equality in democratic, Western contexts.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Dress, Gender, and Nation-Building in the Age of Modernization in the Middle East and North Africa**

In the previous chapter I took you through a brief tour of the evolution of women's clothing and fashion in modern Europe and North America, which was, at its core, an instrument of social control; on one hand, sustaining rigid gender roles, while on the other hand, preventing women from attaining equal status. Yet as women recognized how their clothing was utilized as a regulatory and patriarchal apparatus in the hands of the law and men, many Western women found power in dress as they resisted not only the styles but the meanings weaved into women's clothing in their efforts to attain social and political citizenship and freedoms. In this chapter, I outline more closely the debates and politics of dress in the Middle East and North Africa since the turn of the twentieth century. Specifically, this chapter shines a spotlight on how clothing has been a decisive apparatus in shaping public and state politics, particularly in regard to women in Iran and Turkey, whose dressed bodies, like women in Europe and North America, had been subject to reform, regulation, and extensive refashioning in an era of rapid modernization and nation-building.

Before delving into the politics of the veil and the emergence of alternative fashion in contemporary Iran, it is necessary to have an understanding of the politicization of clothing in the context of the history of the Middle East—particularly Iran's contentious sartorial history. Compulsory veiling and women's resistance efforts today are part of a much larger story in Iran, where women have incessantly been caught in a centuries-long tug-of-war between the forces of modernity and tradition which have fought

relentlessly to lay claim to their dressed bodies. As both symbols of male honour and potent political resources, the dressed bodies of Iranian women have been appropriated and utilized by various political factions throughout Iran's modern history to assert the ever-changing socio-political landscape of the nation.

Although states across the Middle East and North Africa understood the political significance of dress, at the turn of the twentieth century, it was namely the Iranian and Turkish states who recognized clothing's potential as a political tool and communicative aesthetic necessary to attaining their visions of modernity in an era of rapid progress and nation-building. Although neither country was directly colonized, the mid-nineteenth century saw contact with Europeans escalate during a period where European powers not only had a grip on nearly every continent, but were self-appointed symbols of civilization and modernity, which Iranian and Turkish reformers alike both envied and admired. While discussion as to why the Ottoman and Persian Empires had lost their esteem and influence in the global order were already taking place among Iranian and Turkish reformers, their self-reflections regarding their societies intensified following increased relations with their European counterparts.

Commending European progress and their international achievements as colonial powers, Iranian and Turkish reformers, keen on attaining the same economic, political, and international prestige, began pushing for their own country's modernization. Although establishing modern schools, militaries, and industries were necessary to attaining this vision, it was the refashioning of citizen's bodies—especially women's bodies—that was believed to be central to achieving national reformation. In the context of nation-building, the image that the dressed bodies of citizens uniformly asserted was as important as any other institution.

Reformers were mesmerized by how Europeans dressed. Men, in their prim, proper, and minutely detailed uniforms and suits, and women, in their feminine and decorative dresses, whose mobile and visible bodies were present alongside men at various social functions, signaled a visualized image of modernity that Iranian and Turkish reformers took note of. With

the Queen of England also on their minds—who ruled over the most powerful imperial power—Iranians and Turks, both men and women, were confronted with an entirely different image of womanhood than they were used to. European women who accompanied their husbands on international trips were aesthetically visible, usually educated, and appeared to be active in public life as they openly socialized with men. Alternatively, Iranian and Turkish women wore loose, dark attire that covered the entirety of their bodies with the exception of their face and hands, while they were relegated to the private sphere as they followed social codes of gender segregation.

It was around this moment that more women began joining men in the larger discussion of national reformation as they began to question their gendered seclusion. Their drive to be educated, to be more involved in public life, and assume more active roles in their countries were taken up by reformers as necessary causes that needed to be achieved for the advancement of Iran and Turkey, and Muslim contexts in general. But the new possibility of alternative scenarios and gender relations cultivating the seeds of desire for national transformation rested upon the unveiling of women—a heavily social and political issue which religious and conservative sectors across the Middle East denounced. Although getting rid of diverse ethnic and tribal aesthetics in favour of uniform, European modes of attire was necessary for imagining a civic body that reflected a united modern nation, to both male and female reformists, it was the veil that stood as a sartorial antithesis to Europe and an obstacle to modernity. Despite hundreds of years of religious and cultural use, reformers urged for the veil to be discarded in order for the progress of Iran and Turkey to commence.

Iran and Turkey are useful sites to examine the significant role that clothing has played in the context of nation-building and modernization in the Middle East, and contributes to a small but growing body of literature that recognizes clothing as a political institution; one which illuminates the imperative correlation between the state and the necessity for the dressed bodies of citizens to be key players in the nation-building context (See for example Guenther 2004, Parkins 2002). While clothing had been utilized by both Iran and Turkey as a tool for nation-building and modernization, the

politicization of clothing in these contexts also points to the rather complex relationship the Middle East has had with modernization in light of conservative Islam; namely, the obsession over the veil and what this has meant for women and gender relations. As the Islamic regime in Iran has used the veil to regulate women and assert their image of an Islamic society since 1979, unveiling efforts at the turn of the twentieth century by Iran and Turkey had similar intentions: to employ women as symbols and signifiers of what the nation was supposed to be. Regardless of women's agency or their limited participation in the conversation, their dressed bodies were nonetheless utilized as political props to symbolize and represent the new modern citizenry in which Islam was part of its distant past.

While this chapter will focus largely on Iran and Turkey, it will also include a brief discussion of unveiling in the context of Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, it would be insufficient to discuss the case of Iran or Turkey without acknowledging the case of Afghanistan. As the first country in the Middle East to challenge traditional conservative Islamists regarding women's clothing, including women's social and political rights, Afghanistan was a precedent for Turkish and Iranian leaders. However, the subsequent downfall of the Afghan monarchy following their drive to modernize and encourage women's rights by reforming dress points to the heated and long-standing politics of women's dressed bodies and their socio-political rights in the Middle East.

### **Queen Soraya and the Case of Afghanistan**

Like the modernist leaders that would later come to power in Iran and Turkey, King Amanullah (1919-1929) of Afghanistan was eager for his country's move towards modernity. Having been admitted to the League of Nations after the British recognized Afghanistan's independence in 1919, King Amanullah and his foreign educated wife, Queen Soraya, with the advice of his foreign minister, Mahmud Tarzi, who was also his father-in-law, looked to dress reform as a modernization effort; a means for Afghanistan to attain international prestige as a progressive society and to be positioned as a key political power on the global stage. Aware of the

communicative power of dress, he believed in the promise of aesthetics having the potential to alter people's views and mindsets; assuming that traditional values could be reformed by simply refashioning the dressed body (Gettleman and Schaar 1997). Although no official laws were put into effect, dress reform began when King Amanullah made it compulsory for men to wear European-inspired suits while they were visiting the capital. Women, too, were subject to restrictions, expected to remove their *chadors* from certain areas while in Kabul. Although the veil had long been part of Afghanistan's religious and cultural life, King Amanullah, along with his influential wife, argued that Islam did not actually require women to veil. Together, they actively campaigned against veiling (Billaud 2015).

Educated in Europe, Queen Soraya had progressive ideas for Afghan society and its women. Although she often dressed modestly in public, she agreed with her husband that Islam did not require women to veil, and insisted on challenging this presumption as she emerged as the first woman in Afghanistan to wear Western-style attire outside of the royal palace following her husband's announcement that veiling was not a religious obligation. Soon after, either willingly or unwillingly, the wives of government ministers had to follow suit (Billaud 2015). With her visit to Turkey in 1928, Queen Soraya made headlines and aroused cultural fears among Afghanistan's conservative religious sectors after wearing a sleeveless dress with her face, hair, and shoulders uncovered. This public presentation was a radical move away from traditional Afghan society; a society where sex segregation was the norm, women observed the veil and covered themselves, and men did not expose their bare bodies as part of social code.

Yet following Queen Soraya, women of the upper class strata began wearing European styles of dress, an action that both the King and Queen believed were needed if Afghanistan wanted progress both socially and politically. As Julie Billaud writes, "the level of progress achieved in Afghanistan was primarily measured by a woman's unveiled appearance—the veil symbolizing tradition, backwardness—adopting European styles was to 'embrace European norms'" (2015:37). To both the King and Queen, reforming women's dress was the engine needed to begin redefining

women's social positionings in the country, which was what Queen Soraya was devoted to working towards.

However, the sudden changes the monarchy sought to bring about, coupled with efforts to unveil and refashion women entirely, gave further ammunition to the religious and conservative right who grew increasingly displeased with their reform efforts. They argued that the imposition of liberal and westernized values were a betrayal to Afghanistan's cultural and religious mores, and an attack on patriarchal power over women. As changes to women's dress played into the cultural fears and emasculation of men of conservative Islamists, King Ammanullah was overthrown by religious clerics and conservative Afghan's in 1929. Afghanistan, once a precedent for Iran and Turkey, soon became a cautionary tale of the consequence of dress reform and women's unveiling in the Middle East.



Queen Soraya of Afghanistan, 1919

(Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen\\_Soraya-Afghanistan.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Soraya-Afghanistan.jpg))

## **Clothing Politics and the Making of Modern Turkey**

While Afghan and other Middle Eastern reformers looked to Europe as the epitome of prestige and propriety, Europeans, who had either formally or informally colonized the region, often observed their Eastern counterparts with disdain. Having already assumed international superiority in terms of the colonization of nearly all continents, which concurrently placed white Europeans high up on the racial pedestal, Europeans were accustomed to observing non-Europeans in an inferior light. This not only included perceiving the customs, rituals, and traditions of the Other as ‘satanic’ and ‘barbaric’, but how they adorned their bodies stood in stark contrast to European civility and progress. The more they learned about Muslims and the strange cultures of the Middle East and North Africa through travelogues, novels, and newspapers, the more Europeans exaggerated and sensationalized the exoticism of the East: their bizarre and unusual customs and behaviours, their immoral traditions, and of course, the apparent repression of their women—physically segregated from men and forced to be hidden behind a wall of dark, oppressive clothe (Najmabadi 2005, Said 1978).

In Turkey, European perceptions of the Ottomans (1299-1923) were formed through these exaggerated Orientalist conceptions which they came to understand Islam through; with images of veiled women compounding the Middle East’s seeming backwardness, which suited the political agendas of colonial powers. Aware of these sentiments, Mustafa Kemal (1923-1938), leader of the Turkish Republic, was quick to distance Turkey from Islam in favour of a secular state following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. Kemal and Turkish reformers came to see that the stark sartorial differences between Europeans and themselves meant that reforming the dressed bodies of the Turkish citizenry was a fundamental step towards achieving modernity. Displaying a new national identity by way of clothing was conceived as a tactic to display a new image of Turkey to the international community. Consequently, one of the very first initiatives by Kemal’s government was to enforce the Hat Law in 1925, which required all male government officials to wear brim hats and Western-style suits. This was intended to create an illusion of unity by blurring overt differences of



ethnic and religious affiliations between the citizenry, which was considered an obstacle to nation-building.

Yet as observed in the case of Afghanistan, it was primarily the veiled bodies of Turkish women, as well as their lack of participation in public life, that became subject to extensive state targeting and regulation. Up until this point, most rules and dress codes for the general public focused primarily on men, presumably because women did not have a strong presence in either public spaces nor in public life. But in the 1920s, at the onset of a new modern republic, where Kemal was keen on separating state and religion, women's presence and participation in public space was imperative to progress.<sup>11</sup>

Although the veil was never formally banned during this period, women were encouraged to replace their veils with Western fashion in the name of women's rights and as a step towards achieving their "emancipation." To portray a new image of Turkey to the global audience, one which was distant from its Islamic, traditional past, images of beautiful Turkish women in bathing suits and pretty dresses were depicted in a myriad of photographs, cartoons, and illustrations. State-sponsored beauty pageants became popular vehicles of propaganda where scantily-clad women, who revealed their uncovered hair and bare arms and legs, helped promote state-foisted images of liberated, modern Turkish women. The emergence of women's new public representations led to a reformation of Turkish womanhood, challenging the once rigid gender roles between men and women, and their seclusion from the public realm. Photographs of women as lawyers, parliamentarians, pilots, and athletes also began to appear. Although such displays were part of the state's propaganda and political agenda, modernization in Turkey did indeed pave the way for Turkish women to work outside the home, attend higher education, and attain a myriad of rights, including political rights such as the right to vote in 1930 (Shissler 2004, Göle 1996).

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<sup>11</sup> An obstacle to modernization, Kemal's disassociation with Islam was meant to move Turkey towards a secular legal system by replacing Sharia, abolishing Islamic religious orders, and closing all religious schools (Gökarıksel and Secor 2010, O'Neil 2010).

Unsurprisingly, women's greater public presence, coupled with their bodily "liberation," clashed with conservative Muslims and religious clerics who had long expressed their opposition. But as Iran would follow suit, rattling the norms of traditional Turkey through the refashioning of both the public realities and dressed bodies of women and the citizenry were fundamental to the sweeping changes which accompanied Turkish and Iranian modernization.

### **The Politics of Clothing and Modernization in Iran**

Like Afghans and Turks, Iranian reformists during the Qajar era (1785-1925) were struck by the differences between Iran and Europe, perhaps none more so than by the social interactions between men and women. Unlike sex-segregated Iran, where women were largely confined to the private sphere and absent from much of public life, the contrasting presence of European and Iranian women became subject to much self-reflection and discussion among Iranian intellectuals and reformists, who conceived of a modern Iran with greater presence of women in public life (Najmabadi 2005, Paidar 1995). Slowly, women were brought into the nation-building process, especially after their formative role in the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 which sparked public discussion about the position of Iranian women for the first time (Osanloo 2009, Moallem 2005, Najmabadi 2005, Paidar 1995).<sup>12</sup>

Yet, as we have seen in numerous revolutionary and nation-building contexts since the French Revolution, the actual *image* of a modern nation was absolutely necessary to the creation of a modern state. The institution of clothing thus became a major preoccupation of both reformists and the

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<sup>12</sup> The idea of women's rights was sensitive to both anti-constitutionalists and pro-constitutionalists. It is also important to mention that there was no official women's movement at this point nor did any woman base her political identity wholly on feminist endeavors (Paidar 1995). However, the establishment of a constitutional system provided the foundation for claims to be issued for state institutions pertaining to women's legal and political rights, instigating serious discussion pertaining to women as a societal group for the first time (Osanloo 2009).

state as they recognized how European women's dressed bodies correlated with their visibility in public presence, which Iranian reformists also linked to the progress of Europe itself. In other words, modernity had to literally rest on the dressed bodies of ordinary Iranians, woven into the fabrics of the nation-building process, and expected to represent and fortify a modern Iran.

Iranian dress reform began with men who grew increasingly self-conscious about their appearances following growing contact with Europeans. During the Qajar period, members of the Court and aristocracy wore European suits and ties, followed by the educated urban strata who adopted the style. These changes were largely opposed by religious clerics under the premise that it was forbidden to wear the "infidels" clothes, insisting that it was "heresy" (Chehabi 1993), even though they did not have any religious justification for such a pronouncement. But it was not until Reza Shah (1925-1941), who founded the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 and was fueled with a drive to modernize Iran, that dress as a national reformation endeavour was taken up on a more serious and wider scale.

The second phase of Iran's modernization project and dress reform began in the late 1920s when men were expected to wear hats (*kolah-i Pahlavi*), jackets, dress shirts, and pants. By 1935, all state employees were expected to wear hats as routine uniform, which was followed by state directives to teach employees European modes of behaviour, including different styles and colours of dress appropriate for particular occasions and certain times of the day (Chehabi 1993). Despite Iran's incredible diversity, Reza Shah, like his counterpart in Turkey, was keen on blurring population differences to represent a homogenous and united nation. State-building had to entail nation-building, which meant equating national unity with uniformity in appearance. Reza Shah and reformers knew very well that to create a modern state, the image of a modern nation was essential, and citizens bodies had to be tied to the nation-building process in order to posit and fortify a modern Iran. Although men had to be refashioned in Western attire to achieve this image of progress and national unity that was believed to be so vital to the cause, it was the unveiling of women's bodies, in particular, which were fundamental to reform.

Although the Woman Question had been subject to several decades of discussion among men and women up until the second phase of Iranian modernity in the 1920s, it was not until the rule of Reza Shah that women were formally brought into political discourse. And although demands to unveil women had been raised by male as well as upper class and educated female reformists prior to Reza Shah's consolidation of power, it was due to the rapid modernization efforts of Reza Shah that unveiling had been seriously considered as an imperative political agenda.

Following a meeting in 1928 with Afghanistan's King Amanullah and Queen Soraya, Reza Shah was encouraged by Iranian reformists to issue a law making the wearing of the veil in public illegal. But Reza Shah treaded dress reform carefully, cautioned by the overthrow of King Amanullah by religious clerics and conservative forces as a reaction to unveiling and modernization soon after their meeting. Although Reza Shah was hesitant in the face of public and conservative resistance in Iran, upper class Iranian women began to slowly challenge veiling customs on their own. Some wore unconventional colours and styles of *chadors*, while others refused to veil upon returning from their trips to Europe and other predominately Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, such as Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, where women had already begun giving up their veils at their own accord. Although women's unveiled appearances sparked public outrage, subjecting them to physical and verbal abuse by conservative and religious onlookers, many activist and reformist women stood by their conviction that unveiling was the precondition to their participation as legitimate social citizens (Paidar 1995).

Although Iranian women who were in favour of discarding the veil, like Egyptian women, believed unveiling was necessary to their social and political participation in public life, unlike Iran, the state in Egypt had little interest in women's clothing. Like other contexts where men had a more prevalent public presence, the Egyptian state was indeed more preoccupied with male government employees observing European attire, which was influenced by the British occupation of Egypt. But women's veiling or unveiling appeared to not be an issue for the state. However, such debates

were subject to considerable discourse in the public sphere by both conservative and modernist forces.

While in Iran and Turkey, the state had linked women's unveiling and the advancements of their rights to progress and nation-building, the materialisation of feminism by women themselves in Egypt developed vis-à-vis the country's move towards modernity. Feminist demands were vocalized by emphasizing nationalism and anti-British sentiments and, together, were formidable forces which had an incredible effect on the progress of Egypt (Ramdani 2013). It is within this context that Egyptian women, well organized and notably politically and socially engaged, took it upon themselves to reject the veil, which was perceived as not only backwards and even uncivilized, but an obstacle to women's rights and their social and political citizenship (Ahmad 2011). Arguing that there was a strong link between the veil and their exclusion from public participation, dress reform emerged as an important public discourse and public form of resistance among Egyptian women.

In 1923, Huda Sha'arawi, a pioneer of Egyptian feminism and a leading social reformist of women's suffrage and education, passionately criticized Egypt's cultural and religious restrictions on women's dress, including their freedom of movement. In one incident of active defiance against veiling, Sha'arawi tossed her veil into the Mediterranean Sea. Later, upon returning from abroad, she removed her veil in front of a crowd at a Cairo train station. Ambivalent at first, the crowd of onlookers cheered her on. Such an act of rebelliousness against cultural and religious norms eventually influenced other Egyptian women of the modernist class to discard the veil (See Lanfranchi 2015, Quawas 2006). Although unveiling was met with some resistance, within a decade of Sha'arawi's defiance, only a small minority of Egyptian women continued to observe the veil. In Iran, however, unveiling unraveled in much different way, with men, religious factions, and the state all participating in both the conversation and the move to actualize unveiling. Women only had an indirect say, however, partly as strategy and partly due to fear of backlash from reformists who did not consider women activists as a potent social force.



Huda Sha'arawi

(Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Huda\\_Sha%27arawi2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Huda_Sha%27arawi2.jpg))

While Reza Shah had yet to legally ban the veil, the state supported Ladies Centre (*makaz-e banovan*), headed by Reza Shah's daughter, Princess Shams, was formed to help facilitate the making of 'new' Iranian women. While the Centre was to be a space for women to discuss and advocate for matters pertaining to various social and political issues effecting women, including health, profession, education, and their societal roles, the Centre played a pivotal role in training women to adhere to European modes of behaviour and bodily decorum while encouraging women to unveil and observe modern dress based on Western styles (Kashabani-Sabet 2011). Although mass production was not yet introduced in Iran, and dresses were not yet seeping into the country from Europe, women began designing their own outfits that were modern yet still modest.

Given how culturally and religiously rooted the veil had been in Iran and the meaning it held in connection to modesty and respect that were socially and culturally engrained in women and girls, the Centre was utilized by the state to condition and socialize Iranian women to believe that, although they were no longer obligated to wear the veil, they could, and should, remain feminine, modest, and self-disciplined. Women were also urged to not be

enticed by the alluring behaviours of sexual immorality or assume masculine attitudes. As modern women, they were expected to be capable of containing their sexuality without the need to don a veil (Kashabani-Sabet 2011, Najmabadi 1993), which was argued in part to limit the conservative opposition to the new role of women. Soon, more women from the upper class strata joined this informal unveiling movement as they appeared in public unveiled as the Ladies Centre had the cooperation of the police to protect them from public harassment and abuse.

Despite heated debates with conservative and religious sectors of Iranian society around women's bodily presence and participation in the public sphere, modernists, eagerly awaiting the country's reformation, encouraged and pushed Reza Shah to finally ban the veil for all women following his key meeting in Turkey with Mustafa Kemal in 1935, where unveiling had already begun, and where women had won the right to vote a year earlier. Ready to do so, Reza Shah's intention to ban the veil was delayed due to violent backlash by religious and conservative sectors of Iranian society, known as the Gowharshad incident.<sup>13</sup> Yet less than a year later, Reza Shah appeared in public with his unveiled wife and daughters at the opening ceremony of Tehran's Teacher Training College.<sup>14</sup> It was there that Reza Shah proclaimed that unveiling was necessary for Iran's progress, which could only come about if women were "emancipated" from the veil.

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<sup>13</sup> Religious clerics responded to what they saw as anti-religious initiatives by holding semi-secret meetings and protests. Meetings took place in Gowharshad mosque in Mashad, where oppositional *ulama* and preachers gathered. On July 13, 1935, security forces stormed the shrine and mosque. While some were killed, most *ulamas* were arrested and exiled from Mashad (See Chehabi 1993:216-7)

<sup>14</sup> At the teacher's training college, Reza Shah said: "I am exceedingly pleased to see that as a result of knowledge and learning, women have come alive to their condition, rights and privileges. Being outside of society, the women of this country could not develop their native talents. They could not repay their debt to their dear country, not serve it and sacrifice for it as they should... We should not forget that [up to this time] one-half of the population of the country was not taken into account... I expect you learned women are now becoming aware of your rights, privileges and duties to serve your homeland, to be content and economical, and to become accustomed to saving and to avoid luxuries and extravagance" (Chehabi 1993:218).

The veil was officially banned on January 8, 1936, marking the day as Women's Liberation Day.

Reactions to unveiling varied. Among the educated elite, unveiling was welcomed as a positive step towards women's liberation. However, there was widespread resistance against the veil's ban amongst traditional and religious sectors. For many conservative men and women, the removal of the veil symbolized disgrace and sin, and aroused a sense of immense embarrassment and shame for many women who felt uncomfortable appearing in public without their veils. This prompted male family members from disallowing their wives and daughters from appearing in public unveiled as the ban was used by conservative families as justification to disallow a significant number of women and girls from attending schools and working outside the home. Those who dared to appear in public veiled were coercively and often violently unveiled by the police in public (Osanloo 2009, Poya 1999, Hoodfar 1997). Others, feeling embarrassed by not being veiled, opted to wear hats in public.

Those who either willingly or unwillingly could not appear unveiled in public had to find ways to leave their homes without being seen. Writer Reza Harakeni explained that his father would carry his mother and wife to the public bathhouse in a sac to avoid having them appear unveiled, and to also dodge consequences for appearing veiled in public. He was eventually stopped by a policeman and arrested (See Chehabi 1993:221). Many, however, continued to wear their ethnic clothing. While state efforts to unveil and refashion the clothing styles of all women may have indeed impacted women living in urban centres, dress reform certainly did not reach all the small rural villages that were widespread across Iran. My grandmothers, for example, continued to observe both the veil as well as ethnic garments and costumes associated with the tribal and ethnic group which they belonged to.

Although reformists welcomed unveiling, an unexpected consequence of unveiling was that it posed a major blow to male authority and patriarchy. Hamideh Sedghi writes that:



For many men, their honour had long been associated with their hold on women...the source of a man's personal power, indeed his masculinity, resided in women's seclusion, restrictions in their physical appearance, and control over their sexuality and labour (2007:89).

She goes on to write that the Iranian female body, which was once private and exclusive to and owned by men, was now made public, and their grip on women was now weakened. Even for reformist men, unveiling indirectly loosened the control they, along with other male familial patriarchs, had over their wives, daughters, nieces, and sisters. Reza Shah, too, a leader who hailed unveiling and women's so-called emancipation, was not totally comfortable with his wife and daughters appearing in public unveiled, as his daughter would later admit, but he viewed it as necessary for the advancement of the country.

Yet unveiling and Reza Shah's political program to "liberate" women had much to do with limiting the power of the clergy. Clearly, the veil ban did not reduce the opposition of religious leaders to unveiling, particularly since it came on the tail of major reforms that took power and control away from the clergy who had a monopoly over the education of young children and institutions of justice. Since the discourse of women's emancipation emerged during the Constitutional Revolution, clerical opposition to the equality of women was based on their belief that it went against the laws of Islam. They claimed that women's unveiling would mean adultery and loss of feminine modesty, not to mention male honour and a weakening of patriarchal control. For religious clerics and conservative sectors of Iranian society, "there could only be one motivation behind women's emancipation, and that was the conspiracy of "morally corrupt," westernized intellectuals to create easy sexual access to women" (Paidar 1995:67). It is this long history of hostility between the forces of modernization and religion that has shaped some of the Islamization programs in the Islamic Republic, especially laws pertaining to women's rights, veiling, and sex-segregation. As I will discuss in the upcoming chapters, these assumptions continue to be reproduced by the Islamic

Republic and conservative Iranians, feeding much of their ideological assumptions since the Revolution.

Despite major opposition to unveiling by some conservative and religious factions, the unveiling of women was pushed ahead in the name of modernity, and European fashions, which had already begun to appear in the Qajar court, quickly emerged in Iran. Businesses flourished for seamstresses and beauty salons, opening up new opportunities for women to earn an income as well as to socialize with Iranians outside of their families. The emergence of European and Western fashions also quickly appeared in Iran as trade commissions were sent to buy clothes and hats from Germany and France. Accordingly, statesmen and high officials, under the threat that non-compliance may lead to job loss, were instructed by Reza Shah to appear in public with their unveiled wives as a means of encouraging and normalizing the presence of unveiled women in public. Those who failed to comply were fired.

While the outer appearance of the body was now refashioned to adhere to European styles of dress, Iranians, both male and female, were equally expected to behave like Europeans. One discourse of the veil was that it not only stood as a visible marker of difference between Iranians and Europeans, but it was the reason for why the two genders remained segregated. Mingling with people of the opposite sex in public spaces was thus encouraged with the hopes that intermixing would eventually become a normative part of Iranian society.

Clearly, Reza Shah was fueled with the drive to modernize Iran, implementing a series of social reforms which were intended to advance women's social and economic realities in the name of women's so-called liberation and national modernity, which was in part a response to the growth of the women's movement (Hoodfar 1997, 1999, Paidar 1995). But in this era of nation-building, women's liberation and unveiling was first and foremost put in the service of imagining a modern Iran. We should not ignore the fact that that Reza Shah, despite his role in bringing women into the public sphere, advancing their education, and spewing the rhetoric of women's emancipation, was a nationalist whose sole goal was to modernize

Iran. He was anything but a women's rights advocate and did not genuinely believe in gender equality. As Sedghi contends, the Shah's "gender reforms did not intend to undermine women's actual oppression and exploitation" (2007:90). Modernity in the name of women's unveiling and emancipation was integral to the state's modernization endeavor and, as a result—and arguably only because of this—were women offered entry into the workplace and educational institutions at a much higher rate than any other period in Iranian history.

In 1941 Reza Shah was forced to abdicate by Britain and Russia and was replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979). In the first decade of the Shah's rule following his father, there was a relatively open political climate that offered space for freedom of expression and association, which many activist women made use of to advance women's social and political realities. While it had become more acceptable for women to appear in public spaces across Iran unveiled, the enforcement of unveiling fell in disarray during the Shah's reign. In a way, intervention of police in enforcing unveiling was mostly meant to protect women who were unveiled from conservatives who viewed women's unveiled presence in public as an attack on their masculinity. Thus, once the general public had accepted the presence of unveiled women, the intervention of police was no longer necessary. The state was also much more preoccupied with the oil crises and the demand to nationalize oil, which was, until this point, largely in the control of the British. Mounting Iranian nationalism and the demands to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) eventually led to its nationalization in 1951, which was strongly opposed by England and the United States. The leader of the movement to nationalize oil, who would eventually become the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh (1951-1953), was overthrown by a military coup devised by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service in 1953 (Heiss 2010).

Thus, the Woman Question was of little concern, particularly since Iranian women did not yet have the right to vote, either. However, as this contentious episode in Iran began to stabilize, Americans paid more attention to Iran, encouraging the Shah to introduce more economic and

social reforms to ward off the possibility of a socialist revolution. This resulted in what would be referred to as the White Revolution in 1963, which gave women the right to vote. Women's participation in the workforce began to grow as the modernization endeavour marked by the White Revolution represented a significant turning point in Iranian industrial development and the expansion of the labour market (Paidar 1995).

Later, women working in the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) managed to lobby for the Family Protection Law. Passed in 1967 and revised in 1975, the law helped women work outside the home while giving them considerable rights in marriage. The law also limited men's unilateral right to divorce and polygamy (Afary 2009, Hoodfar 1999, Sansarian 1982). These achievements signaled that the monarchy was becoming more accepting of women, given that women were granted more rights in this era than any other moment in Iran's history. Although such legal changes did not affect the lives of a majority of Iran's female population (mostly those living in rural areas and urban slums) as Homa Hoodfar states,

[i]t would be a mistake to belittle the considerable ideological, symbolic, social and psychological significance of these reforms to women and to society at large, which indicated that women deserved more rights than tradition accorded them (1999:20-1).

The incredible achievements of women who mobilized for social and political citizenship was highly telling of the agency and power Iranian women possessed; a power which Iranian women under the Islamic Republic continue to retain and utilize.

This was a turning point in Iran, as the process of modernization, based on the Western model of modernity, began to escalate. With closer ties to the United States and the West, Iran's expansion of print media, radio, television, and cinema evolved and expanded. This not only brought further economic advancements, but a transformation of gender and sexual relations, which had already begun to shift since the 1930s and 1940s (Afary 2009). As prime targets of the advertising industry, propagated images of

more modern feminine bodies were commended as appropriate and desirable, which the media, either directly or indirectly, encouraged women to aspire to as famous Iranian singers and actresses influenced ordinary Iranians. The modern bodies which Iranian women adorned in films, photographs, billboards, and beauty pageants thus fit neatly into the general appearance of expanding modern industrial centres of major Iranian cities, particularly after the oil boom of 1973. Glamorous holidays resorts had been built, attracting wealthy Iranians and foreigners alike, while casinos, luxury hotels, discos, and entertainment centres were created, providing the grandeur seeking, consumerist upper-middle class strata the chance to engage with and within Western idealism (Paidar 1995). At the same time, there was also a move by the urban public and middle classes to appreciate the nuances of Iranian culture and art, and to incorporate these into the modernity they lived.

Although Western styles of dress were encouraged, veiling restrictions were eased under Mohammad Reza Shah, and many veiled women who were once secluded to the private sphere following the veil ban in 1936 re-entered public spaces for the first time, observing a new style of veiling as they wore scarves instead of *chadors*, the latter of which was associated with tradition. Veiled women who wanted to access public spaces and educational institutions reworked traditional veiling customs in order to access spaces which were formally denied to them, and in doing so, simultaneously challenged conservative and familial regulations and expectations of them leaving the home to seek education and work. Yet regardless of this new act of modernity that veiled women were partaking in, they continued to experience verbal abuse and societal shunning. In the eyes of the state and many Iranians, the veil still signified backwardness and tradition, and the observation of the veil signalled that veiled women did not possess the same social and political ‘presence’ as unveiled women (Hoodfar 1997, Zahedi 2007).

While both Pahlavi’s had co-opted women’s own initiatives, presenting themselves as “champions” of women’s liberation (Sedghi 2007:76), women’s “emancipation” did not necessarily mean independence. As Hammed Shahidian argues, “[t]he refashioning of patriarchy in Iran was

neither constitutional nor emancipatory. It involved...a transformation of patriarchy from “private” to “public” (2002:36). Women were still subject to male authority, in the home, workplace, and in Iranian society. Their bodies and state-foisted feminine identities and dressed bodies were to reiterate and stand as a representation of a modern nation, where women signified feminine beauty and poise while appearing as educated and constructive members of society, despite the unfair treatment they experienced as a result of patriarchal norms. Yet, the new context offered women more options and possibilities which they used in mobilizing for further change.

Iranian women refused to remain passive as they pushed and utilized their bodies to reach further legal and social advancements, which they would continue to employ well into the revolutionary fervor of 1979 as critical players that eventually helped to overthrow the Shah. While women mobilized their activism against Western imperialism and the Shah’s oppressive dictatorial rule in a number of ways, they also began to critique the modern, westernized female body that the Pahlavi state had once manipulated to symbolize Iran’s modernity, and did so through the very thing that was once imperative to monarchy’s political endeavour: clothing. Women’s use of dress to challenge and resist the state in Iran, therefore, did not begin in the Islamic Republic—it had also been strategically utilized by women to challenge the modern dressed body, westernization, and the sociopolitical endeavour of the Pahlavi government.

### **Clothing as Resistance During the Iranian Revolution**

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was the peak of several decades of mobilization by various underground political forces. As Iranians became increasingly dissatisfied with the Shah’s iron-fisted domination of the state, and his ruthless drive to construct an image of international prestige at the socio-economic disadvantage of Iranians, men and women joined together under the banner of freedom, independence, and anti-American imperialism to

overthrow the monarchy (Zahedi 2007, Paidar 1995). The Revolution offered women a critical platform to voice their demands while expressing their discontent with gender inequality in various social and political contexts (Poya 1999). They joined underground leftist organizations, participated in peaceful and violent demonstrations, organized strikes and work stoppages, and even took part in guerilla attacks against government installations (Afary 2009, Paidar 1995, Nashat 1983).

In the decades leading up to the Revolution, Islamic study circles began to gain popularity among Iranian men and women. In these study circles, women used this space to criticize images that associated modern womanhood with sexual objectification and consumerism while they questioned the relevance of adhering to Western ideals of femininity (Hoodfar 1997). The modern dressed bodies women were once encouraged and forced to adhere to were now being resisted by many Iranian women, arguing that such appearances encouraged “mindless women” and “Western dolls” who were preoccupied with self-adornment, Western fashions, and skimpy dresses (Betteridge 1983, Yeganeh 1982). In order to challenge Western notions of femininity and simultaneously the Shah, young women of various political, ideological, and religious factions adopted clothing as a new avenue of resistance.

Among leftist organizations, such as the Marxist Fadaye'en Khlaq, women dressed in jeans and short-sleeved Maoist t-shirts, which was meant to express both their political affiliation and lack of concern for the modern body encouraged by the state, opting to wear jeans and t-shirts to express their solidarity with the working class (Afary 2009). They also refused to wear colourful clothes, arguing that material items and caring for appearances were trivial and *bourgeois*. For others, especially in light of the rise of Islamic study circles, veiled women appeared with their veils and *chadors* as symbols of protest against the Shah, and some designed a new style of veiling which they distinguished from their traditional mothers. Moreover, some secular women also began to observe the veil or modest dress in their public anti-Shah demonstrations. Yet the decision on part of

secular women to wear the veil was not at all a religious motive.<sup>15</sup> Rather, adopting the veil was a tool of opposition and an act of unity with women, dispelling the myth that they were Godless communists. Simultaneously, it was meant to challenge modern images of sexual objectification and westernization.

Whether it was by observing the veil or using certain styles of clothing to express or deny their leftist sentiments, Iranian women managed to transform the boundaries of gender identity and feminine expression through the use of clothing during the revolutionary period, particularly succeeding in challenging the image of the “modern woman,” which had been indirectly encouraged by the media, social norms, and the agendas of the state (Paidar 1995). Moreover, it was in this context that the veil and *chador* ceased to be symbols of backwardness; reappearing in public presence not so much as religious markers, but as icons of resistance, representing a new social and political meaning (Afary 2009, Zahedi 2007, Hoodfar 1999, Azari, 1983a, 1983b, Betteridge 1983).

Yet among most women who did utilize the veil as a form of public opposition, they did not do so with the intention of electing a religious government or making the veil compulsory. However, the Islamic regime would present many revolutionary women, as well as men, with an unexpected surprise soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Mohammad Reza Shah and his family fled Iran in January 1979, bringing an end to monarchical rule in Iran. The new regime was established one month later.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to show how clothing had played a critical role in the political projects of nation-states in the Middle East and North Africa. But this chapter has also aimed to show how women have used clothing as a means of resistance historically in the context of Iran. I have

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<sup>15</sup> Secular women in this context means that they did not regularly observe the veil.



intended to describe the politically significant and contentious relationship the Middle East has had with clothing, and particularly women's veils, an aesthetic which has historically been deeply weaved into the foundation of culture, religion, morality, and male honour in the Middle East. And since the early twentieth century, women's bodies, as symbols of the nation, were utilized to portray its government's ideological and political projects. This story, I have tried to show in this chapter, was not only relative to Iran, but played out in the case of Afghanistan, Turkey, and to a different extent, Egypt and other Middle Eastern and North African countries.

Subject to the control and regulation of the state, the dressed bodies of Iranian women were unveiled and refashioned to accompany the modernization endeavor of the Pahlavi regime. Although done in the name of women's emancipation, the forced refashioning of women's bodies, and the continuous expectations of adhering to Western aesthetics, in large part, worked to police and regulate their bodily appearances and bodily comportment, projecting a limited meaning of femininity for both veiled and unveiled women alike. It is no surprise that women found power in clothing as a form of resistance during the revolutionary uprisings, where women on various ends of the political spectrum adopted certain modes of attire to express their opposition to the Western body that was both directly and indirectly impressed upon them. The veil, in its various representations, too, once treated as a backwards aesthetic, emerged as a powerful political statement and an act of opposition, worn by religious women who emerged to public visibility during the Revolution, and adopted by secular women as a statement of resistance against Pahlavi 'Westoxification'. This chapter has aimed to show how the dressed bodies of women have been critical to the making and re-making of modern Iran.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Wearing Ideology: Re-Veiling and Re-Making New Muslim Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

The Iranian Revolution initially began as a secular movement which aimed to establish a democratic state free from outsider intervention. Yet following a set of optimistic political miscalculations by secular forces, Iran was soon declared an Islamic Republic, placing Ayatollah Khomeini as the absolute leader of the Shi'ites and the Supreme Leader of Iran (See Menasheri 1990, Keddie and Hooglund 1986). Despite the critical role that women played in the Revolution, and having been assured by Khomeini that their rights would be guaranteed under his governance, women were immediately at loss as soon as Khomeini's government consolidated power (Paidar 1995). New laws granted authority over women to male control, intending to return women to the private sphere of the home and away from the public sphere of politics and visibility, eradicating almost all of the social and political progress women had struggled to attain in previous decades. Yet what was perhaps most crucial to the success and establishment of the new Republic was to re-veil women, which was viewed as necessary to not only successfully Islamize Iran and to re-establish the ideological power of the clerics that the Pahlavi government had undermined, but to return women to their 'appropriate' place in the Islamic society the regime intended to create.

Keenly aware of the power of clothing and the communicative potential of aesthetics in helping construct and fortify a national image, the leaders of the Islamic Republic recognized the significance of clothing as a political institution and a means to reinstate its ideological control over a new

citizen-populace. The implementation of Islamic dress codes for women, and to a lesser extent, for men, helped strengthen and confirm state ideology and social law, while simultaneously ridding the country of the Shah's 'Westoxification' in the name of morality. The uniformity produced by women's veils were also intended to depict Iran as a homogenous and devoted Muslim civic body by which differences of religion, political persuasions, and contrasting opinions ceased (See Moallem 2005). And by strategically using Islam as a justification for the regime's move, the larger aim of enforcing the veil had much to do with the imposition of a social order based precisely on the regime's implementation of a new "judicial discourse" on sexuality and the subjugation of women (Afary 2009:265).

While theologically and through interpretation, the enforcement of Islamic dress codes is justified by Quranic arguments suggesting that the veil is a marker of a woman's Muslim identity and chasteness (although nowhere in the Quran does it actually say women have to observe the veil), politically, the Islamic regime has used the veil in order to safeguard the success of its ideological influence and social control of women. By regulating the outer appearance of the body, the regime postulated that women's inner beliefs would eventually conform to Islamic values and state ideology, where women would eventually rid themselves of their individual identities for the collective will. It was expected that, through the power of clothing, women and girls would internalize the ideological fabrics which donned their bodies; accepting their roles as mothers and daughters of the nation while assuming their gendered and sexual docility, where they would remain in their compliant position under the authoritative control of men as the veil worked to refashion them from the outside-in.

It is this strategic use of clothing as a political institution, and the even more hyper-politicization of dress codes by the Islamic regime than previous governments, that I would like to turn your attention to in this chapter. Here, I will illustrate the significance of dress as a tool of control and nation-building, carrying over the discussion from previous chapters regarding the communicative power of aesthetics in helping drive and fortify political initiatives. This chapter will also focus on the development of alternative fashion, which has evolved from several phases of resistance to dress codes,

beginning with mass demonstrations against the Islamic regime soon after its establishment in 1979. This has been followed by subtle actions and changes to dress codes well into the early 2000s, which, as I will demonstrate, has evolved alongside the success of the women's movement, women's greater access to higher education, and their interactions with the globalized world.

This chapter will also introduce the experiences, memories, and voices of different generations of Iranian women who have been subjected to difference phases of dress codes; from the moment it was implemented, to the time when women began to incorporate more colours and styles, challenging the conceptions and ideologies of the veil, including the place women occupy in Iran. It is this chapter here that lays the background to understanding not only the role that clothing has played in contemporary Iran as an ideological apparatus as well as a tool of oppression by the government, but something that the women of Iran have been actively challenging, through both overt and subtle means, since the very beginning of the Islamic Republic, which the pervasiveness of alternative fashion today is a testament to. It is within this context that a generation of young women have grown up to resent and resist the Islamic Republic through perhaps the most dangerous tool of them all: clothing, which women have appropriated as a means to challenge the very aesthetics that were meant to regulate, oppress, and turn them into new Muslim women.

## **The Establishment of the Islamic Republic and the Re-Veiling of Women**

To Ayatollah Khomeini, Western society was the root of all of Iran's ills. A staunch critic of the Shah, he argued that the previous regime had encouraged the spread of 'immorality' and 'prostitution' among young women under the banner of progress and emancipation, claiming that modern women who were unveiled were sexually available and lacked morals (Nashat 1983:195). Modern women were condemned as "seditious" and "dangerous," even "destructive of public honour" (Afshar 1987:74), a

belief which stemmed from long-held views among religious clerics and Islamists that Iran's path to modernization had resulted in a loss of not only Iran's Islamic identity, but the Islamic identity of women, which was marked by their wearing of the veil (Najmabadi 1993). As a response to the Pahlavi government's efforts to undermine the authority of the religious clergy and to unveil women, one of the first and central objectives of the regime's Islamization project was to re-veil Iranian women.

It only took a matter of a few weeks following the Revolution, on 7 March 1979, for Khomeini to entertain the idea that women should observe the veil. While some women assumed this was merely a joke, finding it hard to believe that the new government would expect them to veil, the reactions of most, the very next day, marked the first mass demonstration since the overthrow of the Shah. On March 8, coincidentally International Women's Day, an estimate of more than fifteen thousand women took to the streets in protest.<sup>16</sup> Early that morning, meetings were held at all-girl high schools and the University of Tehran, where women spontaneously organized citywide marches. Some started at the university while others went to the office of Prime Minister Bazargan, chanting that they did not participate in a revolution only to go backwards.

Women were violently attacked and assaulted by pro-regime supporters, hardliners, and armed Revolutionary Guards, who yelled "*either you put a scarf on your head or we hit you on the head!*" (Poya 1999:131) Yet women persisted. They continued their demonstrations for nearly a week, holding rallies and protesting in front of the National Television building, denouncing the news black-out of the demonstrations. Women even issued a manifesto in front of the Ministry of Justice, calling for gender equality in both public and private domains while also demanding that the "decision over women's clothing, which is determined by custom and the exigencies of geographical location, be left to women" (Nafisi 2006:5).

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<sup>16</sup> To see a video of the women's demonstration against veiling in March 1979, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqrPoPYZfc0>

Expectedly, women—young and old, secular as well as religious— did not take Khomeini's dress code pronouncement lightly. By this time in 1979, Iranian women were present in all areas of public life. The number of women who were university educated was on the rise. Girls were attending schools in higher numbers than ever before. Women were intellectuals, politicians, judges, teachers, writers and poets, professors, doctors, engineers, and athletes. They were educated and politicized enough to seek democracy and participate in Iran's future as decisive social and political subjects. Thus, they refused to take the place of passive, second-class citizens. Yet only within a matter of a few days of the Islamic regime coming to power, women were denied from serving as judges, joining the army, and even participating in sports. And now they were being subjected to state-enforced Islamic dress codes.

In response to this major backlash and resistance by women, government officials stated that Khomeini's words had been misunderstood, and withdrew (Nashat 1983:119). The next day, while some women groups removed their support and activities for the anti-veiling demonstrations, some 20,000 women continued on, attending a rally at the University of Tehran on March 11, followed by a march towards Azadi (freedom) Square. Along the way, offices, hospitals, and schools expressed their support for the movement. Women were forced to give up on the final leg of the march, however, as attacks and verbal harassment by male and female religious fanatics escalated.

In a counter-protest movement on March 16, nearly 100,000 demonstrators, mostly religious women in black *chadors*, rallied in Tehran to defend Ayatollah Khomeini and denounce the anti-veiling demonstrations with the support of the regime who provided demonstrators with free transportation and protection from harassment on the streets (Afary 2009:274). With their long, flowing black cloaks, covering nearly the entirety of their bodies except for their faces, the image of a homogenous group of *chador*-clad Iranian women chanting pro-regime slogans and *death to America* ultimately became the iconic image of post-revolutionary Iran. To the West, this image continues to represent the threat and danger of fanatical Islam. Yet speaking in general terms would be

both an insult as well as a disservice to the many religious women who observed the veil out of religious conviction, who, along with devout Muslim men, denounced the government's actions to make the veil compulsory, warning against reducing Islam to the veil and not respecting personal and social freedom. Many also argued that the imposition of Islamic dress codes was a discriminatory act directed towards women (Yaganeh 1982).

Despite initiatives to halt the imposition of the veil, in June of 1980, the veil was made mandatory uniform for all women working in government institutions. Riled up and angry, women again waged various campaigns to defy the regime. In large numbers, they organized sit-ins and rallies, forced work stoppages and strikes in hospitals, banks, and schools. Private and public gatherings were organized in urban cities while women published articles criticizing the new veiling policy (Sedghi 2007). Women were met with severe violence, from both government and vigilante forces. My aunt, who recalled the anti-veiling demonstration she attended near Ahvaz University, described a peaceful protest turn deadly. In large numbers, pro-regime supporters, knowing that they had the support of the regime, participated in attacking young protestors with household objects, such as hammers and kitchen knives. My aunt was cut on her left shoulder, while her former teacher, a doctor, was later executed by firing squad for helping wounded protestors at the event.

Although women may have failed at preventing veiling from becoming obligatory, what is important to take away from this initial demonstration against the imposition of the veil is that it was not an organized initiative. There were no sole leaders calling for women to mobilize and organize, nor were there pamphlets and posters being circulated days or weeks in advance. Unlike previous rallies and demonstrations, the movement against the veil was an organic and spontaneous protest devised in a single day by word of mouth and the power of grassroots initiatives, where women of all ages and religious affiliations joined together in a mass revolt to protest an unjust law that would affect and oppress all women—even those who adhered to the veil and Islamic doctrine.



Their resistance efforts were also a testament to the vitality and strength of Iranian women who were unwilling to passively accept unjust government directives that were discriminatory, which is a strength that Iranian women continue to possess today through their on-going resistance and oppositionary efforts, many of which are done through what Hoodfar and Sadeghi (2009) consider as non-organized movements, such as wearing alternative fashion.

Most literature which has documented the veiling protests have not given the anti-veiling demonstrations much justice, failing to give power to the political strength and agency of women in devising such rigorous resistance efforts on their own, especially without the support of men and leftist parties. In fact, leftist women did not partake in demonstrations against compulsory veiling, nor did they lend their support to women fighting against it. Despite the fact that clothing was indeed important to leftist women's political affiliations and how they presented themselves during the Revolution as a communicative emblem, as discussed briefly in the previous chapter, leftist women trivialized clothing and women's appearances, treating both dress and how women looked as a sort of *bourgeois* preoccupation. They sided with the belief that the imposition of the veil was not an important issue to rally against, overlooking the ideological, social, and political consequences compulsory veiling would have and what it would mean for women's rights under the Islamic Republic.

Those who saw the enforcement of the veil as an act of discrimination against women quickly realized that its enforcement was not merely about dress codes. It was not *just* about what women were wearing. Women realized that the enforcement of the veil was a means to control and regulate Iranian women, and for the state to limit their social and political rights and freedoms. The emergence of alternative fashion, which I will discuss in more detail later, has been a response to this.

Despite their unrelenting resistance, given the public preoccupation with the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which brought much destruction and misery, women eventually had no choice but to comply with their new work dress codes. Initially, the regime expected women to wear the full-length black

*chador*, which covered the entirety of their bodies with the exception of their hands and faces. This was a style of veiling that religious women who supported the regime wore and continue to wear today. Yet with some comprising with women, which I will discuss in more detail soon, the state had eventually permitted women to wear *manteauxs* (long jacket) and a *maghneh* (head covering) instead. Black pants, shoes, and socks were required to be worn along with their choice of black, navy, grey, or beige *manteauxs*, the only colours the regime permitted. Nail polish, make-up, and perfume were restricted. To ensure that workingwomen followed dress codes, the *basiji*, or morality police—a policing force formed by the regime—stood at workplace entrances with large guns, scanning women's bodies for signs of improper attire, ensuring that no strand of hair peeked out from beneath their veils and that women weren't wearing perfume.

The *basiji* were also in charge of ridding the workplace of immoral influences of the West. *Pahk-sazi*, they would call it, was to rid and literally clean up the workplace—and the citizenry—of Western aesthetics and clothing items such as jeans, make-up, and perfume, which the regime had now banned. Those who were sympathetic to the Shah, including ordinary people who had travelled to Europe for vacation, and leftists were all fined, arrested, or fired from their jobs while many thousands were executed.

While dress codes were first imposed on working women and then introduced to women and girls in schools, it was eventually imposed on a wider national scale. Even the floral print *chadors* that many religious women had long worn to go to hospitals, mosques, or to make quick errand trips outside the home were forbidden, and eventually, all women and girls, beginning from the age of puberty, and regardless of religious beliefs, were expected to observe the veil at all times in public.



This public sign explains what style of dress are considered appropriate. The statement under the *manteaux* and *maghneh* on the right side of the sign read “no problem,” while the *chador* on the left says “much better.” In other words, while the *manteaux* and *maghneh* are appropriate, wearing a *chador* is ideal (Source: <http://imgur.com/a/JqG1VI>)

The logic behind enforcing the veil as a national project rested on the belief that women’s bodies stand as an emblem for the nation’s morality. On one hand, women are regarded as needing protection from the ‘satanic’ lures of men, while on the other hand, women’s bodies are capable of sparking total and utter moral and social chaos. Due to the assumption promoted by the regime and some Islamic doctrines that men are unable to control their sexual appetites, women have been expected to hide their bodies in order to keep men from committing sin. The assumption that women’s bodies,

their movements, their tone of voice, and the colour of their clothes provoke men's weaknesses and arouse their desires continues to be perpetuated (Afshar 1987, Azari 1983a, 1983b). My mother even recalls a moment when her work supervisor told her and her co-workers that they could no longer laugh because their male co-workers could hear them. Subsequently, women's gestures had to be controlled, their laughs muffled, and their emotions suppressed for the protection of the new Iranian nation. If not controlled, a woman's sexuality and her effect on men could be dangerous and fatal for the whole society. Consequently, women were to be hidden under loose, dark clothing for the protection and moral stability of the country.

There were rules for men's clothing, too. While less extensively regulated than women's clothing, men were only allowed to wear pants and long-sleeved shirts in public and were expected to avoid Western attire. This referred to ties, jeans, collared shirts, or anything deemed as *bourgeois* (See Najmabadi 2004). Those who resisted dress codes would be stopped by the morality police or denied service at stores and restaurants. Speculations stirred about those who did not comply with dress codes and appearances at the workplace, too. My own father was subject to workplace remarks and rumors for being a communist simply because he wore jeans, not dress pants, and had a mustache, not a beard—the latter of which was a sign of religiosity. Nor did he observe daily prayer, which was now expected during working hours. It also did not help that he was educated in the United States, which alone aroused speculations of him being too westernized. It was only a result of such pressures, and only as a compromise and to get attention off of him, did my father let stubbles of his facial hair grow out, limiting his shaves to once a week.

As a cultural purification, the regime would claim, women's veils, and to a lesser extent, men's beards, were intended to serve as "visible markers of state-sponsored masculinity and femininity" (Najmabadi 2004:43). By wearing Islamic dress codes, the regime had hoped that Iranian citizens would adopt and internalize a new prescribed set of gender norms, including a new discourse of Iranian femininity, which pictured women as compliant, obedient, and sexually submissive. Women's dressed bodies

were meant to depict a new image of Iran, where the power of clothing had as much value as the way of the gun.

### **The Power of Images, the Veil, and Nation-Building**

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which was supported by European powers and the United States, was intended to bring down the new and unstable Islamic regime by Iraqi forces. Ironically, however, the War greatly contributed to the success and fortification of the new regime and enabled it to carry out many of its undemocratic sociopolitical visions. Partly because many Iranians felt that the nation should not be divided during the War, people refrained from collective opposition towards the new regime. And the fear of death, despair, and violence that the War produced among Iranians, especially for those who lived in regions Iraqi forces attacked, such as my family, aroused enough distress that people were more concerned about simply surviving rather than opposing the regime.

Conservative authorities, well aware that they might not get a second chance at taking advantage of this relative social calm, used the War as an opportunity to actualize many of its repressive laws and institutions. This not only included destroying all oppositional forces that challenged the government, but also gaining control of all newspapers and media outlets; reducing freedom of expression to a bare minimum. Television only consisted of religious seminars and lectures. News anchors only discussed the war front. Together with war films, the news perpetuated the discourse that the ongoing revolution and the War was 'our victory.' The regime also imprisoned and executed leftists and those who had either worked for the Shah or opposed the new regime by the thousands (Abrahamian 1999).

Coupled with this deafening war propaganda, the entire atmosphere of Iran's once booming and lively urban centres had taken a rather threatening and dangerous turn at this point, and the urban landscape radically altered. Flowers and vivid colours no longer graced public spaces. People no longer freely socialized together. Censorship of books and films came into effect. Dancing, a significant part of Persian culture, was banned. Women were barred from singing because the regime claimed that it would sexually

arouse men. Artists, musicians, and intellectuals were threatened, driven underground, and even executed. In short, any element of happiness and fun was banned.

To ensure that women and men abided by new social rules, and that their dressed bodies complemented the new ideology of the regime—and fit into the social landscape of the new Islamic Republic—their external control was necessary. Soon after the Revolution, citizens were subjected to the surveillance of the regime's policing forces. The *basiji* first began as a volunteer militia in 1979, known as the *Basij-e Mostazagin* (Mobilization of the Oppressed), made up of members from working class, uneducated, and religious backgrounds who were expected to safeguard the emerging Republic from citizen dissonance while protecting the nation's morality from "corrupt" Western influences (Sadeghi 2009:50). They patrolled public streets and private homes (going against established Islamic tradition, which respects privacy of people's homes) to ensure that deviance from the newly imposed norm ceased by harassing, physically abusing, and arresting anyone caught wearing Levi's Jeans and nail polish, or were listening to Michael Jackson and KISS, or were associating with people of the opposite sex, given that sex segregation was now official policy.

Repercussions for challenging dress codes, especially in the first decade of the Islamic Republic, were often violent, immoral, and dehumanizing. Women could have faced up to seventy-four lashes or imprisonment up to one year. They were attacked with batons on the streets, yelled at, insulted, harassed, and sexually demoralized for their clothing. In more severe cases, women had acid thrown on their bare faces and skin by supporters of the regime, a practice that has continued and increased up to this day, given that perpetrators know that they could get away without punishment (Afary 2009, Kar 2006).<sup>17</sup> In the name of ridding the country of corrupt Western influences, police forces monitored both public and private spaces, raiding

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<sup>17</sup> 2018, 21 July. "Iranian Judiciary Closes Acid Attack Cases With No Convictions But Promises Victims Compensation." *Center for Human Rights in Iran*.  
<https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/07/iranian-judiciary-closes-acid-attack-cases-with-no-convictions-but-promises-victims-compensation/>

mall, stores, and private homes for music, videos, alcohol, gender-mixed parties, and inappropriate clothing, all of which were now illegal.

Islamic and revolutionary quotes were also placed around the country's public spaces while pictures of martyrs were placed along the highways, and evening prayer was blasted through public speakers, intended to remind citizens of their necessary loyalty to the nation and Islam. Photos of Ayatollah Khomeini were superimposed on the Iranian people, as they were placed in schools, airports, restaurants, hotels, and public billboards, reminding the nation that Khomeini, just like the Shah's picture before him, was apparently the closest man to God, watching their every movement. To make women and men feel part of the nation-building process, and to feel attached and part of the collective whole, state political propaganda had been strategically positioned around Iran's public spaces. Women's veiled bodies were meant to fit into and complement this, assuming an ideological space and representation.

To construct a national Islamic identity, the veiled body, dressed in long attire and dark, banal colours which hid the female form, was meant to accelerate and represent the new Islamic state, and intended to be a reflection of a homogenized, disciplined Islamic whole where individual bodies ceased to exist. To ensure that people felt part of the nation and the ideological venture of the state, the Islamic regime had aimed to make people, especially women, physically, mentally, and ideologically part of the Republic's imagery (Varzi 2006). As Minoo Moallem contends, the veil was a symbol "which spoke to individuals, reminding them of their responsibility and commitment to Islam, calling them to give up their individuality to the communal will and laws of political citizenship in the sacred community of God" (2005:110). Instilling images and utilizing the power of aesthetics tactfully across public spaces—from pictures to quotes to clothing—has had a potent role and function for the regime, acting as a "powerful actor on the political stage" (Varzi 2006:24).

This, coupled with the broader aim of Islamizing Iran on a national scale, is why the leaders of the Islamic Republic were keen on using schooling as a site to remake Iranian boys and girls. Antonio Gramsci (see Gramsci 1992)

continues to remind us that states require ideological forces—perhaps even more than coercive ones—to maintain and regulate the citizen-populace and to maintain hegemonic control. Every state utilizes education to help transmit specific ideologies in order to maintain its hegemony, and it is not an Islamic versus secular, totalitarian versus democratic issue, either, given that democratic states also use education to their ideological and political advantage (See Apple 2004). But in the context of Iran, the Islamization of the education system as a means to socialize children has been critical to their larger Islamization project. In terms of girls' education, it has been used as a site to condition young girls to adhere to an ideologically constructed feminine identity, with the veil and the regulation of their dressed bodies and bodily comportment as central concerns.

As they reflected back on their education, my conversations with Iranian women suggested that their education seemed to focus less on how to be pious believers but instead how to *appear* as good Muslim women. While they were taught to observe religious prayers, a great deal of time was spent on informing and shaping young girls' bodies to follow specific notions of sexuality and femininity. In other words, in order to be "good" Muslim women, girls were taught how to dress accordingly, how to behave around men, and what to do to avoid sin:

In schools they would tell us to wear the veil so that men don't see our hair. We were told that if they see our hair we would go to hell. They told us to not speak much to men who weren't our brothers, or fathers, because even the sound of our voices could be... seductive. So, we were told to fully cover our bodies because if a man sees our bodies, they will be aroused, and we would have committed sin and God would not be happy with us. (Samira, age 31)

By fashioning children's minds and bodies at a younger age, self-monitoring was expected to eventually replace the need for external control. However, to do this, particular methods for instilling such rules were necessary. Women were told as young girls that if they deviate from the rules, their biggest punishment would be that they would go to hell, and if they did not



cover their hair, they would hang from each strand they left uncovered for eternity.

The imposition of Islamic dress thus became perhaps the most crucial instrument through which the regime was to Islamize the nation, as well as to maintain its hold over women in order to regulate them. Yet from the very moment the veil was even considered as dress code on part of the new regime, Iranian women have challenged it.

### **Resisting Dress Codes in the Islamic Republic (1980-2009)**

Despite intensive measures undertaken by the Islamic regime to construct a compliant, disciplined, and devoted Islamic society, women's challenges to dress codes and their social and political liberties persisted. Alternative fashion, which will be discussed in the next chapter, began with women devising alternative channels to defy the regime's dress codes since the very beginning of the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Although women actively resisted the imposition of state dress codes through mass protests and demonstrations, increasing repression and the use of violence to silence the opposition, coupled with an eight-year war with Iraq, which helped to consolidate the imposition of the veil, forced women to devise alternative strategies of resistance as their active fighting and arguing with the morality police fell on deaf ears. The threat of violence and imprisonment for contesting veiling was also so strong that it eventually caused women to reluctantly accept dress codes. But caught between unwillingly adhering to compulsory veiling and saving themselves from potential repercussions for failing to do so, women developed less overt and openly pronounced avenues of resistance to dress codes; strategies that simultaneously challenged the regime's expectations of them while helping women attain personal and immediate satisfactions in a period where collective mobilization was impossible and overt resistance to dress codes was met with severe repercussions.

Women's resistance to dress codes initially began in the home. Although the regime intended to completely refashion gender relations and women's

positions in both the public and private sphere, not to mention eradicate anything remotely Western, family gatherings, birthday celebrations, parties, and friendly get-togethers in the privacy of trusted homes were used as spaces to simultaneously challenge dress codes, sex-segregation laws, and women's 'new' place in Iranian society. Discos and lounges were all banned now, and Iranians had no choice but to resort to private spaces in order for men and women to continue to mingle together and socialize. Women also used this relative privacy to wear clothes and attire that were now strictly forbidden.

Private spaces emerged as strategic spaces of opposition, used to drown out the hostile environment that Iran had become. Taking advantage of being away from the watchful gaze of the morality police, women continued wearing bell-bottom jeans, fitted dresses, high heels, and make-up, and sometimes with even more freedom than pre-revolutionary times, while they socialized with their female friends, male acquaintances, and relatives over illegal music and alcohol. For women, wearing such clothes took on a whole new meaning and use; functioning as a personal means of challenging the symbolic and physical violence that was being done to their bodies and their identities. Clothing also emerged as a tool to resist what the regime was expecting of them, even if their opposition was not necessarily public.

As a group of friends whose memories of this era bounced off each other while they reminisced about the early years of the Islamic Republic asserted, "we dressed up and wore makeup and enjoyed the company of our friends and relatives in order to keep our sanity." Yet the constant worry of being spied on by pro-regime neighbours, not to mention the *basiji* encroaching on their privacy, prevented many from feeling completely free and comfortable to partake in this private resistance, even in the privacy of their own homes. For others, their femininity and womanhood, given the excessive control of their appearances by the regime, was lost on them. I spoke with two women who were in their early 20s during this period:

During those times [under the Shah] the streets were so colourful. Then everything changed. The dark colours of my hijab matched the way I felt...I resented being a woman eventually. I

would say to myself, 'Oh God, why did you make me a woman?!' In the first few months, I didn't even want to go outside. I remember calling in sick a lot to work just so I wouldn't go outside and wear those clothes and have to be around all that. (Manna, age 54)

It was like...you didn't like yourself anymore. You didn't feel good. Before the Revolution, I wore nice clothes, make-up. I was very feminine. We weren't allowed to wear any of these things in public in the Islamic Republic. You just had to go out with a plain, dull face, dressed up in depressing colours of navy blue or black...and it wasn't just you. Those early years.... it was like women were zombies. Everyone looked depressed and unhappy. (Roxana, age 54)

While the private space emerged as a tacit space of resistance to public dress codes—which Iranian women and men continue to take advantage of today—others resorted to questioning the religious relevance of wearing the *chador* and the recommended black and brown colours that the regime enforced as part of official dress codes. Documenting and recounting historical and religious texts, women argued that early Islamic garments did not actually include the *chador*, and that the relevance of wearing only black and brown had no religious basis. In fact, according to Islamic literature, the colour black is considered *makroh*. Although it is not un-Islamic, it is better to abstain from wearing black. While religious leaders were struck by this—not accustomed to being questioned by women—they also could not challenge women who were using religious texts to make valid arguments. Although conservative clerics in the government initially resisted, the regime eventually compromised with women, allowing women to wear the *manteaux* and *maghneh* instead, and permitted the wearing of beige and grey colours instead of only black, brown, and dark navy blue. Defying the *chador* and succeeding was a significant first step in women's public defiance to dress codes in a context where their opposition could have been met with violence and imprisonment. Women realized that using religious texts and references to their advantage were useful for their efforts in regard to personal freedoms for women.

The emergence of colour in women's public attire can also partly be a consequence of women using Islamic references. Consider the story of a woman who wore a bright pink track-suit during her workout. When she was confronted by *basiji* women who scrutinized the colour of her track-suit, she reminded them that pink was the Prophet Mohammad's favourite colour. *How could the basiji arrest her for wearing the Prophet's favourite colour?!* Similarly, others who were confronted by the *basiji* for observing traces of blue and red linked the colours to the flowers and sky found in the very earth that God had created. *How could the basiji arrest women for wearing colours that God gave this earth?!* Others also found ways to resist the government's ban on items such as nail polish. A woman recounted a story about her friend, a teacher, who unwilling to give up her love of having painted, manicured nails. So, she would wear gloves to work to hide her nails, lying about how she had to wear gloves because she had developed an allergy to chalk. It is small stories such as these which indicate the varying ways ordinary women's individual acts of resistance to dress codes took form following the establishment of the Islamic Republic—weaved through private spaces, humor, sneaky techniques, and religious justifications.

Given the scarcity of any serious attention to the development of alternative fashion in Iran, there is really no clear indication outlining when women began flirting with changes to their public attire, but stories described above, including old family photographs, are helpful here. As early as 1981/1982, just a year or so following the enforcement of official dress codes, my review of old photographs show a young woman wearing faded pink pants in the city of Ahvaz while she wore a black, knee-length *manteaux* and *maghneh*. In the latter half of the 1980s, Sofia (age 42) remembers her classmates and friends wearing some aesthetics popular with the British punk style. This was a rather bold move, given that foreign items—especially those associated with Western popular culture—were banned and subject to severe consequences, particularly during the strict and oppressive decade of the 1980s. Another woman I spoke with, Tallah (age 42), recalled that it was after former member of parliament, Faezah Rafsanjani (daughter of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), wore jeans to work that women began wearing jeans in public. This could have been at some

point in the mid to late 1980s, as my father recalls Faezaeh Rafsanjani, who was accompanying her father on a visit to his workplace at an Iranian oil company's gas plant, was wearing denim jeans under her black *chador*. She was later confronted by a journalist on this matter, and she stated that jeans were simply comfortable to wear, easy to wash, did not require ironing, and it saved her time.

For the most part, however, no major changes appeared to women's public attire in Ahvaz, which is likely the case in most urban cities across Iran, with the exception of Tehran. My parents left Iran in 1990, and my mother has no recollection of she or anyone else observing any styles besides dress codes in public. Neither do my relatives who left Iran around this time or women I spoke with who were from this city. This could be partly due to the fact that the War had largely targeted Ahvaz and surrounding cities and towns, and perhaps women were less concerned with altering or challenging public dress codes. But Tehran, anyway, had always been the country's urban hub; the city where the Shah's modernization endeavor had most penetrated in the decades prior, and where Iranians and Western tourists alike flocked to for discos, parties, bars, and for the latest fashions from across the United States and Europe. Today, Tehran continues to be the country's cosmopolitan centre—much like New York is to the United States or Paris is to France—and where we see women donning alternative fashion in larger numbers than elsewhere in Iran. So, it is not surprising that *Tehrani* women, especially those from the secular and upper-middle class, would have started to flirt with changes to their public attire sooner than women living in other large cities.

In fact, Roxanne Varzi (2006:125) mentions that secular women who lived in affluent neighbourhoods in north Tehran (where secular, liberal, and upper-middle class Iranians live) began wearing some colour in public towards the latter half of the 1980s. Others, who were not quite confident enough to challenge dress codes but eager for sartorial change, also encouraged tourists and Iranians living in diaspora who returned to Iran for vacation to add colour to their public attire, given that they were less likely to face repercussions for violating dress codes. Iranian-Canadian scholar Homa Hoodfar had explained to me that while she was visiting Tehran

during this period, she was refused a black veil by a retail worker who insisted she buy the silky green veil she held in front of her instead. Homa explained to the retail worker that she was in Iran for only a short period of time and did not want to encounter any problems with the *basiji*, but the retail worker persisted, urging her to buy the green veil, insisting that Homa can perhaps help return the use of colour to women's public attire as she would be less likely to face repercussions for doing so. Homa eventually had no choice but to leave the store with the green veil.

By 1991, Homa recalls that the colours women wore in public were beginning to change, having bought a green *manteaux* in Iran and wore it during a visit to a government office. She also recalls that it was around this time that young women began adopting Qajar era-styles of dress and ethnic Persian costumes, consisting of long dresses, which began appearing in the markets, and which some women adopted for their public attire while they were walking outdoors.

It appears that by the early to mid 1990s, subtle modifications to women's public attire were appearing in cities other than Tehran as well. In Ahvaz and Shiraz, photos show women wearing cheetah print and dark-blue veils, and padded-shoulder beige trench coats, with some coloured hair peeking out from underneath their veils while wearing subtle make-up. But by this time anyway, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had become president and Iran's borders were slowly opening up to the West after a long decade of social repression and limited access to the global arena (Mahdi 2003). Mass amounts of foreign goods and items emerged, and clothing and retail stores opened up across the country selling foreign clothing items and fashion trends from the United States, Europe, and Turkey which were previously banned. Various colours of veils, although not too bold, were sold. Women also began to wear traditional nineteenth century Persian patterns and elements of ethnic costumes in public, which they used to their advantage considering that they could not be condemned for wearing Western clothing.

Rafsanjani's presidency helped to subtly liberalize Iranian society. Print media was modestly relaxed by the 1990s and, although illegal, satellite

television was introduced. Despite the regime's initial attempts to restrict the forces of globalization from filtering into the country, Western television shows, movies, and music videos managed to make their way, often illegally, into the homes of millions of Iranians throughout the 1980s and more widely during the 1990s. For the youth who had grown up only knowing the Islamic Republic, it was the first time they had ever really been able to observe their foreign counterparts abroad; where they were confronted with different realities that existed beyond Iran. Taking advantage of this easy access to information from abroad and the rise of consumer capitalism, a youth culture in Iran rapidly emerged; radically contradicting the official values of the state. Combined with the opening up of public and political life under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), the regime's concealment of modest women and pious men, in both mind and appearance, destabilized as their power clashed with the forces of globalization and the new openness to the global arena which Iranians, men and women, were eager to participate in (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008).

The upsurge of the use of non-traditional colours of veils and *manteaux* on a larger scale than the early 1990s was in part due to watching foreign counterparts via satellite and Internet. Women who were older adolescents and teenagers during this period explained that it was through music videos, movies, online blogs, and fashion magazines from North America and Europe, including Lebanon and Turkey, that they were influenced to slowly include and play with different colours and subtle styles in their daily public attire. Before misreading this point and denouncing such women as passive consumers emulating a Western lifestyle—the same rhetoric which the regime often criticizes and mocks them for—it is important to recognize how it has been through such avenues that young Iranian women, who had only ever known life under the Islamic Republic, have had a chance to reflect on a different reality of women outside of Iran. It was there that many women, participants explained, began to question the relevance of wearing the veil and adhering to the limited discourses of femininity and womanhood that the regime had enforced on them since they were young school children.

For Anna (age 35), watching Western women who were unveiled and less covered, yet portrayed scientists, doctors, and engineers in movies and television shows, demonstrated to her that unveiled women were not immodest and immoral—what the regime wanted young girls to think:

Before satellite, *bad-hijab* seemed to be only worn by sex-workers, prostitutes...bad women who were sexually available. But after watching how women were elsewhere, minds have changed. Not wearing the veil isn't so bad as they say it is. It doesn't jeopardize our modesty or womanhood, or our lives.

Socialized to view unveiled and unconcealed women as valueless and decadent, the female characters Anna and others watched signalled to them that women can still attain respectable professional careers despite what they wore and whether they observed the veil. Others I conversed with concurred:

We thought...well... they look like they are happier, they are more beautiful, they can wear whatever they want...it had an effect on us as girls. We learned that there was something more than our own society or...one way of being a woman. We saw that we can be good women even if we didn't wear hijab. (Samira, age 31)

Many of the women I had an opportunity to speak with discussed how representations of women on Iranian and foreign television radically contrasted with one another. They explained that female characters in Iranian broadcasting were usually quiet and passive, and lacked bodily visibility as the *chador* and dark shades of clothing covered them, while the subtext of the shows and movies were generally depressing. In contrast, Western women, including Lebanese and Turkish women, appeared to be generally happier, more vibrant, mobile, and confident. Observing these stark differences, women reflected on the restrictions that were imposed on them in Iran. The opportunity to gaze on the lifestyles of their foreign counterparts registered to them that a different depiction of womanhood was possible, despite the regime's exhaustive efforts to convince them that



their morality and worth were signified through their observance of Islamic attire and modest dress.

Although this period following the 1980s opened up Iran's borders, allowing an influx of technological mediums and foreign goods to appear, which has had profound cognizant and sartorial impact on women, it would be wrong to give these channels all the credit for the both the personal changes and sartorial changes women have experienced. We cannot understand the use of dress and fashion as a tool of resistance in the hands of Iranian women—or its deeply threatening potential to the regime—if we fail to ignore the achievements of the women's movement in Iran, including women's success in higher education and their gaining of greater economic independence, which has aroused a sort of social crisis. As we will see in the next chapter, alternative fashion have emerged as a significant tool of resistance by Iranian women precisely because of the greater independence and confidence that women have; which women explained they needed to survive and contest the discriminatory reality of life as women in Iran.

Given that political organizations and women's associations were driven underground soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, until the late 1980s, women's initiatives were primarily small, informal groups and networks which aimed to raise gender consciousness amongst Iranian women.<sup>18</sup> But the 1997 presidential elections saw a political coming of age for women, as they participated in the elections in unprecedented numbers, voting in Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who supported women's active involvement in civil society. Despite setbacks from the conservative members of the Council of Guardians, preventing Khatami from passing any reform laws that he initially promised, women's organizations multiplied

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<sup>18</sup> While secularist women focused on critiquing the discriminatory nature of the regime's gender policies, most Iranian women worked within the Iranian structure to change their existing realities (Hoodfar 2008). Despite fierce opposition from the conservative clergy, women were able to make their demands heard and legitimized. The restrictions to women's access to university were removed (1986); family planning and contraception became available (1988); a bill was passed for women to receive wages for housework (1991); and divorce laws were modified to limit men's right to divorce (1992) (See Mir-Hosseini 2002).

with their growing demand for women's participation in, and contributions to, civil society under his presidency.

Given this relative openness to women for the first time under the Islamic Republic, Sofia and Anna explained that it was not until the presidency of Khatami that more and more women felt comfortable and safe enough to wear unconventional colours, and to observe new styles in public after more than a decade of strict dress codes and uniformity in appearance in public. This desire to change their public styles not only unfolded through the political changes that were happening for women, but it simultaneously unraveled and developed alongside women's shifts in collective consciousness the more educated women became and the more independent they desired to be.<sup>19</sup>

The opportunity to attain university degrees in higher numbers than ever before, even more than during the Pahlavi era, has provided women with a new sense of personal development, which has helped encourage their self-esteem, shape their confidence, and contour the assertive nature which women have needed in order to survive the discriminatory environment of life as women in Iran. Almost all of the women under the age of thirty-five who I had an opportunity to speak with for this book had either a master's degree or a Ph.D., and for them, educational advancements offered a new realm of opportunities to challenge and transform conventional societal expectations of Iranian women, in both public and private spaces, while a

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<sup>19</sup> Although women were not entirely barred from attending university following the Revolution in 1979, some programs were denied to women, primarily those which were deemed 'unfeminine'. But the 1990s marked a period where women were encouraged by the regime to enroll in institutions of higher education with the prospects of creating a strong and more educated Islamic society, where women could simultaneously be obedient Muslim wives and daughters as well as educated and constructive members of society. The number of female students enrolled in Iranian universities drastically increased in the 1990s, reaching nearly 50% by 1999-2000 academic school year (Kian-Thiébaud 2002:63). Today, women make up nearly 60% of the student body, and their educational advancements have been ground-breaking, not only in Iran, but unrivaled in any other Muslim country (Rezai-Rashti 2012, Sedghi 2007). Since the increase of women's enrolment in higher education has been much higher in comparison to men, women have been subject to discrimination.

new gender awareness has paved the way for a new discourse of Iranian womanhood, beyond a mere veiled, docile, and sexually obedient woman. It is within this context of rapid increases of information technologies, consumerism, feminization of education, and women's political and social strength to challenge oppressive laws in which alternative fashion have developed.

## **Conclusion**

While dress may clothe the body, it is, as I have aimed to show in this chapter, a tremendously powerful tool which can be utilized to enforce a social order that can oppress and impose restrictive gender expectations. The implementation of Islamic dress codes soon after the Iranian Revolution was, in part, utilized as a political institution; a symbolic representation of the new Islamic Republic and the success of its Islamization project. More importantly, though, the enforcement of dress codes had been implemented as part of the regime's disciplining mechanism, intended to regulate women's movements and limit their access to public spaces. Over the course of four decades, dress codes have also worked to control, restrict, and define women's gender expressions and sexualities while subjecting them to the authority of men. While the regime had hoped that by regulating the overt appearance of the body, inner feelings would likewise conform to the state's Islamic ideologies, reality has shown otherwise. The effect which the Islamic regime had initially hoped to have on women has failed. While the state managed to put women back into the veil, they failed at re-socializing women to the regime's expected norms and ideologies.

Although increasing social and political repression during the first decade of the Republic eventually limited overt public contestation, women found subtle and less pronounced ways to challenge dress codes, from using religious justifications to sneaky techniques, to slowly incorporating some colours and new styles into their public attire. By the end of the 1990s, greater access to information technologies, consumerism, higher education, and the consistent demands by women activists for legal, social,

and economic equality have had profound and undeniably positive (by their own assessment) effects on Iranian women. And changes made to their dressed bodies have interestingly accompanied these changes made to their lived realities. As women have pushed to change legal orders which have worked to socially, economically, and politically subordinate and marginalize them, they have managed to also reflect these evolutions of change aesthetically. As women have interacted more with the global world, demanded greater rights, participated actively in the public sphere, while also receiving university degrees and professional occupations, women's clothing has changed along with their growing consciousness and increasing confidence. It is for this reason that we have to pay much attention to the significance of this symbolic yet politically threatening utilization of alternative fashion in Iran.

## Chapter 5

### Alternative Fashion and New Identities

The Islamic regime has worked vigorously to establish an Islamic society based on its own reading of Islam. However, completely reversing a society already on the path to modernization—with the idea of women's equality, secularism, and male-female interactions widely established prior to the Revolution in 1979—has not been easy to achieve. Iranian women have been relentless in their fight for greater social, legal, and political rights, not to mention their insistence to access the public realm in an effort to femininize social, political, and economic arenas previously denied to them. Although once intended to be symbols of the success of the Islamic Republic, with their veils and their uniform dressed bodies standing as an emblem for the unity of the Iranian people and the Islamization of Iran, many young women born under the Islamic Republic have refused to succumb to the invisibility and passivity of the regime's dress codes.

While in the last chapter I discussed the various ways, women challenged compulsory veiling and dress codes, in this final chapter I would like to discuss the social and cultural phenomenon of alternative fashion, which has been gradually emerging since 2009. By neither conforming to Islamic dress codes or Western styles, Iranian women have been combining a unique mix of various aesthetics, colours, styles, and cultural traditions as part of their public attire, strikingly challenging the approved dress codes of black *chadors* and neutral-coloured *manteauxs*. What I have termed 'alternative fashion' is replacing the dark, uniform banality of the Islamic Republic's state mandated attire; a dress code which has worked to depict a limited discourse of femininity, and has been intended to limit women's

social and political citizenship. The image that has been literally weaved into the fabrics of the Islamic Republic's veil has been challenged and resisted by a new generation of women who have refused to follow the regime's discourses of passive and docile femininity which was meant to subject them to the control of men, keep them outside of the visibility of the public space, and rid them of their individual identities.

As this chapter aims to show, women have been shedding the imposed ideological material that has been so integral to the regime's power in favour of diverse new styles of their own making; styles which have evolved from previous phases of dress changes in Iran, where women's clothing is much more pronounced, expressive, unique, and individualized than before. In doing so, women are resisting the ideologies and control of the state while refashioning their bodies according to their own dictates of identity and autonomy.

### **Feminizing and (Re)Fashioning the Public Space**

It is rather difficult to ignore the propagated images that are heavily and strategically placed around Iran's public spaces. Pictures of male martyrs are placed one-by-one down the highways, Islamic and revolutionary quotes said by men are written on the walls, and the superimposed faces of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei signify the patriarchal, nationalistic, and Islamic ideology of the state. One immediately notices an absence of women, especially on billboards and in advertisements that only portray men—a drastic change from what we observe in the country's free market economy. When women are portrayed in images, though, they only appear as mothers mourning the loss of their martyred sons, or modest Muslim women who don the veil to symbolize their chastity and morality. In the obviously politicized and gendered public spaces of urban Iran, women's representations and absence in state propaganda contrasts heavily with their visibility in physical and material public presence as their colourful and diverse dressed bodies suggest an opposing presence.



**'A woman modestly dressed is a pearl in its shell'**  
(Source: <http://imgur.com/a/JqG1V>)

Whether I was in Tehran or Shiraz, the 'modest' Muslim woman, one who hid her hair, covered her body in dark, loose attire, and lacked aesthetic embellishment—the Iranian woman I had always imagined prior to my travels—was drowned out by a sea of women who donned alternative fashion. Walking down the street, hanging out in parks, and mingling in

coffee shops, women were dressed in myriad colours, ranging in style from bohemian to punk to chic. Women had adopted traditional Persian cultural trends, particularly from the Qajar era, where beautiful patterns and colours of turquois were embellished at the bottom of their *manteaux*. They appropriated various aesthetics of British and American rock culture, and donned emulations of Euro-American hipster fashions, wearing popular trends such Vans shoes and Converse high tops while they wore ripped jeans and donned t-shirts displaying pictures of 1970s rock bands. The latest designer fashions by Prada and Versace were worn by others who wore sleek, tight, ankle-length pants, and high heel shoes. As these different styles and materials converged together on the streets of Tehran, a variety of necklaces, earrings, rings, and handbags complemented a diverse array of individual styles, all the while women's forearms, toes, ankles, and parts of their neck, including highlighted and coloured hair, remained visibly bare.

Varying shades and colours were painted on their lips, while eyeliner, eye shadow, and blush coloured their faces. As they asserted their alternatively dressed bodies in public sight, strikingly contrasting with the *chador*-clad women who passed them, women radically contradicted the ideal Muslim women that the regime had worked so vigorously to create over the last several decades. Throughout my weeks travelling around Iran, women's dressed bodies also invited me to rethink stereotypical images of women in the Middle East that have long dominated media representations of women in the Muslim world.





(Instagram: Persian\_streetstyle2)



(Instagram: Persian\_streetstyle2)

The public realm in Iran has been institutionalized and conceptualized as the space where the Islamization endeavor has been played out, while it has also been considered a masculine domain. Yet since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, women have struggled against state rules that have attempted to restrict their access to public spaces. Although women have been planting themselves into the public sphere in various ways since the Revolution, the social and political shifts since the 1990s has altered the ways women have accessed the public realm in Iran. By this I mean that women are consciously and sensibly utilizing the public space for social and political means, knowing its significance to the advancement of their rights, much like European women who knew that reforming their dressed bodies in public, and being seen, were vital to the expansion of dress reform and subsequently, their social and political citizenship, which I discussed in chapter two.

Iranian women, too, aware of the communicative power of dress, have utilized dress in their public presence effectively. As Hoodfar asserts,

Iranian women...have learnt through centuries of exclusion from the public space that public space access is pivotal to autonomy, especially with regards to equality, full citizenship, and control over their own sexuality...Women have understood that visibility is power (2012:208).

While positioning and planting themselves in the visibility of the public space is in and of itself a powerful gesture, not to mention an oppositionary action against the ideologies entrenched in the regime's dress codes, doing so while dressed in alternative fashion presents even more challenges to that space and to the regime's sociopolitical agenda.

Despite potential repercussions, which include being arrested, verbally abused, and physically assaulted by the morality police as well as ordinary citizens, women are utilizing alternative fashion in public consciously and effectively, and recognize that being seen is of paramount importance to their resistance efforts and to asserting their individual bodies in public spaces. In the context of resistance and subversion, for women who are unable to verbally contest the state or express their discontent, given the

repressive and violent nature of the Islamic regime, alternative fashion has taken on the role of a non-verbal opposition in its public form. As Pardis Mahdavi contends, for women and youth in Iran, “the absence of options to express dissent or unhappiness with the regime overtly results in concentrating their efforts on looking good as a way to speak back to the regime” (2009:122). Concurrently, Atoosa (age 31) saw value in alternative fashion as a means of non-verbal opposition, noting, “We aren’t allowed to openly talk or argue, so this is our way of saying we don’t agree. This new fashion is like a gun for us.”

To fathom why the use of alternative fashion in Iran manifests as an important, as well as symbolic act of resistance, attention must be concentrated on the significance of women’s dress and their bodies to the Islamic Republic; both of which have been dramatically and strategically utilized by the state to fortify their ideological project and maintain their power. As the imposition of Islamic dress codes was intended to not only fashion bodies but minds in order to adhere to the ideological undertaking of the state, among the Islamic Republic’s first political moves was to appropriate the bodies of women to foist an obedient and loyal Muslim citizenry. Within the confines of the veil, and drenched in the materials of imposed Islamic attire, a social order rested, and a specific discourse of femininity penetrated. Women’s bodies, hidden and concealed, signified and defined the regime’s definition of femininity: obedient to the man’s will, sexually submissive, passive, and docile. Arguably, the state’s entire political project ultimately rested on the dressed bodies of women. Thus, as more colours, styles, and fits have re-emerged and reappeared upon the bodies of Iranian women, a new meaning of ‘woman’ is appearing; a more individualized body that is challenging the government’s hopes of having a collective and uniform Muslim whole.

## **Expressing Individualism**

Asserting individual identities, especially by women, is a rather dangerous pronouncement for religious fundamentalism (Graybill and Arthur 1999, Freedman 1997). Deemed as a substantial threat to the collective identity,

and an abandonment and betrayal to the group psychology, forming an individual identity implies a rejection of the collective morale and its ideals. For the religious establishment in Iran, Varzi reminds us that the “idea of a transmutable identity threatens the legitimacy of the conservative clergy for whom there can only exist a monolith Islamic identity” (2006:198). I hope I have communicated by now that dress codes in Iran have been meant to function as a tool to make Iran a uniform and unified Muslim society, where both the minds and dressed bodies of the citizenry were meant to symbolize a nation of ideological singularity. The state’s fear of fashion is then in part due to the opportunity it gives individuals to assert an independent body, away from the collective whole, where the individual self is asserted. For Iranian women, asserting individual identities of their own making has been a restricted reality.

From their socialization in schools, where they were not encouraged to form their own opinions or to contemplate their social and familial responsibilities beyond their roles as mothers and daughters, to their forceful observance of dress codes, where the state has dictated what is and is not appropriate for them to wear, Iranian women have rarely had the chance to negotiate their identities. As Leila (age 29) explained, as a woman in Iran, “you’re not supposed to have individualism...it has been denied to Iranian women. You’re nothing but a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife...and anything that is different is viewed as a problem.” Leila’s frustration during our conversation echoed the sentiments of others, who argued that, from the roles women are to take up within the family and society, to the ways they are to behave, maintain their bodily comportment, or dress, the state and social codes have devised the one sole choice, which state dress codes have been intended to personify and reinforce. The unvaried and homogenous dressed bodies of women where differences lacked is thus meant to be a public and visual representation of the reality that women are not intended to stand out nor express an identity that challenges the regime’s rules and norms.

It was clear among my many long conversations that the reinforcement of colour-specific dress codes and standardized appearances among women was a way for the state to void the individual body, preventing women from

forming and expressing an identity which challenged the imagined collectivity. It is no wonder that the use of colour in women's public attire has been important to challenging the regime's ideology and excessive control.

Dark and beige colours that the state initially approved are still the only acceptable colours women can wear in most schools, universities, and workplaces. Setareh (age 28) explained:

They [the state] have an obsession with dark colours for women and they try to make us think that women who do wear these colours are like...the good women...like the model women. But I don't get it...everyone wearing black or brown just makes everyone depressed....It makes everyone look similar. You can't tell anyone apart, but that's what they want I guess.

Besides the initial mass demonstration against the imposition of the veil following the Revolution, women's resistance to dress codes began by challenging the colours that the regime permitted women to wear using religious texts, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Almost ten years before any other changes in terms of style, patterns, and fabrics emerged in Iran, it was small streaks of colour that appeared on women's dressed bodies in public. For many women, then and now, being able to dress in contrasting colours has been a means for them to separate themselves from the mono-colour, undisguisable Iranian whole, and to wear colours that they simply enjoy.

Ava (age 27), too, expressed her discontent with the regime's expectations for homogeneity in appearance, having used a colourful *manteaux* to express her opposition when she was a teenager for the first time:

I remember I bought a *manteaux* that was yellow. I usually didn't wear that type of *manteaux* but I wanted to be different; I didn't want to be like everyone else...black. They [the government] want everyone to be exactly the same. They don't want any changes.

Concurring with Ava, others began to slowly incorporate colour in their public attire, using it as a way to assert and express a distinct body in public while—consciously and unconsciously—challenging the conformity expected of them. Wearing colours helped them appear as unique in the dull banality of black and grey veils, women explained, helping them stand out in a society where they have found it difficult to do so. Yet, colour is also very political, and some are even considered *zanandeh*, even provocative, as certain colours like red have been perceived as being used by women to attract men, or to even communicate their sexual availability.



Although almost all of the women I had a chance to speak with about alternative fashion have either been arrested, assaulted, verbally abused, or scrutinized by the morality police, men on the street, co-workers, and teachers, as well as ordinary citizens who saw it as their moral duty to tell women that their attire was inappropriate—even sinful—women continue to observe alternative fashion because of its significance to who they are as persons who did not want to be limited and confined to the state's veil and dress codes—nor its discourses. The general response from many was that they frankly did not care if they were arrested or fined. As Ava explained, “I just wanted to be myself.” Ladan (age 27) expressed the same assertive, as well as irritated, remark:

I didn't care if they said I wasn't a good woman...I just didn't...this is me...why do I have to pretend to be someone that they want? How is that going to make my life better, or make me a happier, healthier person? I know I am a good woman, and it has nothing to do with my appearance, but to them, that's all that matters.

Although women mentioned that they were more cautious about their appearances when they were younger, as they grew older, though, they have become less concerned with how others react to them or think of them, and instead work to dress in ways that fulfill their own personal contentment, dressing to reflect their identities and choosing styles according to their own tastes and feelings:

In Iran, you can't be yourself...most people can't. You have to be whatever they tell you. You can't show who you are to people...like...you can't be honest with people about who you are. A lot of people judge, and there are restrictions, so you can't really express yourself. But eventually you learn to ignore them...you have to...and one of the ways we can do that is through our clothes. (Yasameen, age 24)

Being that women politically and socially lack other ways to verbally express and define themselves in public, women have found that clothing has been a symbolic tool through which to posit a self-presentation of their own

choosing. The emergence of this relationship between clothing and the expression of individual identity in Iran has followed similar trends as those elsewhere in Europe and North America, at least since the French Revolution, where people have been utilizing clothing to express individual identities rather than signifying their belonging to societal groups, social norms, or nationalistic endeavors. Given the spread of globalization and the rise of consumerism on a global scale, the variety of lifestyles and choices that are available today has also allowed people—regardless of the national boundaries which they are confined to—to utilize items, particularly fashion, in order to distance themselves from tradition and social restrictions in an effort for individual identities to emerge and be present (Negrin 2008, Kawamura 2006, Banim and Guy 2000, Giddens 1991). So, in this way, we can see that the dressed body is a significant self-reflexive project, integral to the sense of who we are and how we think about ourselves; allowing us to choose and control how we want to be seen.

Consider Yasameen's assertion:

It's like we can improve ourselves with these types of clothes. We can decide for ourselves how we want to appear and that is one of the reasons clothes are so appealing to me, because I can choose my appearance. The concept of 'choice' is important to women in Iran. We don't have choices the way you do here in Canada... When you are always told to do this and that, and not talk to those boys, or cover yourself by wearing only these clothes, don't say this, all so you can be seen or thought of as a good woman, being able to choose how you want to look is a really good feeling. And especially for appearance, because we have always been limited, so being able to choose our appearance is a very exciting experience. It's like we get to create ourselves.

For many, the opportunity to choose their appearances is ultimately the means through which they are able to oppose the image that the regime has carved out for them while resisting the state-imposed definitions of womanhood, not only in their public attire, but their private lives and



identities as well. For women such as Niki (age 30), dressing alternatively permits her to resist the state's definition of women, saying, "I was never wearing my clothes the way that they wanted because by dressing this way, I wouldn't let them define me...It's [a] small [act] but it's really important."

Considering that choices have often been limited to women in Iran, from what they are permitted to do leisurely and what they can say in public, to what they can wear, the ability to choose how they wish to appear, especially in the contentious realm of the Iranian public space, is of utmost importance. Alternative fashion is still worn within the limitations of state dress codes, such as wearing a veil (even though most women do not cover all of their hair), wearing pants (although they now range from tight pants, to capris, to colourful loose bohemian styles, and long skirts), wearing *manteaux* and jackets (which women have been leaving open, exposing their tops underneath, and have even shortened, sometimes falling just under their bums). But the extent to which the regime utilized dress codes as a tool of control intended to subject women to docility—not to mention creating an Islamic society free of individual identities or anything that challenged the norm— is being challenged. Alternative fashion has emerged as a dangerous and threatening means of opposition and resistance as women have appropriated new materials, a myriad of colours, and varying styles—creating images of their own choosing—which resonates with what Alexandru Balasescu's work on the Iranian designer fashion scene communicated to him, that "[f]ashion and consumption resonate with a type of internalized form of control, pivoting around the idea of "desire" (2007:278). Thus, by dressing alternatively, women have realized and recognized its symbolic challenge to the state. As Sanaz (age 28) had explained that the 'ideal woman' of the regime is one who "doesn't think, doesn't say much, accepts without questioning," wearing alternative dress is therefore an act of defiance.



(Instagram: Persian\_streetstyle2)



(Instagram: Persian\_streetstyle2)



(Instagram: Persian\_streetstyle2)



(Instagram: Persian\_streetstyle2)

In a restrictive sociopolitical context such as Iran, where women's dress has been highly politicized and contentious, we have to be reminded of Elisabeth Wilson's (2003) claim that those who are in a struggle with the dominant culture are the ones who use dress more consciously. In this context, the significance of clothing is that it is supposed to be worn in the public realm, since the public influences the ways people use clothes to express themselves and make subversive statements (Crane 2000:237). Thus, as public visibility works to transform unspoken feelings into observable actions, asserting an aesthetically separated body ultimately opposes the regime's conception of Iranian women entirely, from their social roles and their place in the social landscape, to how they are expected to dress.

Haideh's (age 25) comment attests to how alternative fashion is used as a form of opposition towards such an expectation of women:

[...] wearing anything that the government doesn't want us to wear, intentionally or not, is a threat [to the regime] because it shows that we are not the dumb, passive women that they had wanted. They wanted us [women] to just accept everything that they said. So, wearing these clothes, it is like saying that we are not thinking the same way that they think, or how they think we should be.

Being able to choose and cross the bounds of state-imposed limitations of proper feminine appearances has offered women the opportunity to assert their individual selves through the mere act of dressing which has emerged as an act of self-assertion. As I discussed in the previous chapter, education, information technologies, and the rise of women's political and social demands have had a profound impact on the overall socio-political climate of Iran, and especially on how women have come to express themselves as individuals, particularly in the public realm. Having come from a generation of Iranian women who have been relentless in their struggles to attain equality by accessing educational institutions, the labour force, and active presence in public spaces, the changes made to women's realities have had a major impact on the overall consciousness and confidence of a new

generation of Iranian women. Several women I spoke with discussed that it was due to this growing confidence that women have been able to change their public attire. Note Goli's (age 26) comment: "Us women have a lot more confidence ...Women want to be more stronger, and it's obvious in clothing...They [women] want to show that they are a person...that they are strong."

Other women talked about this as well:

All the changes come from women...they teach their children what to say, what to do...even if they are oppressed, women are still more open-minded than men in Iran. After 30 years of trying to put limitations on women...it's not working...we have working women...engineers, doctors, taxi drivers....women are fighting to keep their power. (Sanaz, age 28)

The easiest choice for us would have been to just wear the hijab properly and dress like they want us to. But I didn't want to take this way...and you see it with all of these women who wear these clothes. The point is to be honest to ourselves...I think that's what it is in a lot of ways. If I just wore the *hijab* [properly] or a *chador*...I wouldn't have any problems in society...no one would say anything to me... I wouldn't be scared that someone might arrest me. But because of the person that I am...my personality, I couldn't wear those clothes, as much they forced it on me because that would be like I was lying to myself. If I dress this way [in alternative dress] it means that I can be honest to myself... I can show who I am. Also, it shows that I do not agree with them. To wear those clothes [proper Islamic dress] it means that you obey and accept, but I couldn't do it, and when I had to, I didn't like myself. (Roya, age 27)

As this quotation by Roya makes clear, women have resisted the imposition of the regime's ideologies by using alternative fashion in ways that goes way beyond mere consumer items or the need to beautify oneself. The refashioning of their dressed bodies is being done with the higher goal of resisting state impositions that have attempted to regulate their bodies,

sexualities, and identities, and has subjected them to discrimination and harassment. In many ways, Roya's comment sums up how many women view the politics of clothing in relation to women's struggles for autonomy, suggesting that the adorning of alternative fashion are an expression of women's growing confidence, which women must display in public visibility, and which women need to have to not only survive the obstacles of life as women in Iran but to sustain one's own personhood as well.

For women to assert their individualism through alternative fashion contest not only the state's hold over them, but the regime's entire Islamization initiative, too, considering that the veil has long been seen as the success of the Republic and central to the state's power. As Islamic dress has been utilized as the ultimate symbolic tool to control and discipline the minds and bodies of the masses, to sway the citizenry to accept its beliefs, women who assert an aesthetically separated body thus simultaneously imply an ideologically separated one as well—a visual representation of their refusal to accept state gender norms and discourses of what a 'good' Muslim woman looks like. In doing so, their assertion of individualism in public, especially, poses some very considerable challenges to the state.

However, alternative fashion may not be as threatening as it is now if it were not due to the significant and drastic changes made to women's lives in the past decades. Soraya (age 26) spoke of the political threat that women are now posing against the Islamic regime and male authority as they become more educated and independent. She believed that wearing alternative fashion is a sign of the increasing boldness of women:

Women in Iran are very intelligent. Women can speak very well... they are very well educated. I think this is why the government is so afraid now. They are the biggest threat. Women who are more educated stand up for their rights... they aren't going to accept what is being told to them easily, and clothing is for sure expressing that confidence. If they didn't have that confidence I don't think it would have been possible for all these women to go out dressing like this because it takes like...a lot of courage to do that. I remember my mother saying that if someone told her that this is

how women would be dressing eventually, when the government first came [to power], she would not have believed it. And it is because as women get more independent, they want to prove that they are confident, so they go out dressed in these clothes, they have fun with their friends... they are not walked down the street with their fathers or husbands...or some man. Instead they are going out independently, showing that they do not have to depend too much on men or that they are not like the women that the government wants, and this is what the regime is afraid of.

Having this discussion with women also merged into a discussion about alternative fashion being used to challenge male authority; another blow to the state given that they have granted men much legal power to control women.

## **Contesting Male Authority**

Clothing regulations in the Islamic Republic have worked to deny women the ability to form and postulate an identity and self-presentation of their own choosing. Dress codes have also reinforced their submissive roles in the social organization of Iranian society, where women not only have less rights than men, but men are granted legal control over their bodies by the state. Given that a man's honour and power in Iran has historically and culturally been associated with their control over women's seclusion, including their appearances, the adoption of alternative fashion has posed a fundamental challenge to masculine authority. Women spoke of the implications that choosing their own appearances, and accessing public spaces while observing alternative fashion, has on men, by way of the religious establishment and the patriarchal state:

Traditional men don't like women to show their bodies, because that is their way of controlling women. In male culture, they always want to control women, including their appearances. So, when you start choosing your own appearance as your own

personal choice, they don't want that because it shows that they don't have as much control over women. (Jillah, age 31)

This notion also affected what the veil meant—that it was not a religious aesthetic or a symbol of piety, but a state enforced tool for men to control women:

It [the veil] is about a man's belonging...[the veil is not about] protecting women...not protection...it's about not allowing the woman to be seen. I don't think the philosophy is that not being veiled might harm you, 'so because I like you I want you protected from the danger, so I want you to be veiled'... that's not what is going on. It's about...you belong to me. (Leila, age 29)

As Jillah and Leila's comments suggest, compulsory veiling has less to do with religiosity and protection than a means of control and maintaining a patriarchal hold over women's bodies. To Darya (age 29), the veil symbolizes the marginalization of Iranian women because it stands as an aesthetic reinforcement of women's attachment and belonging to men. For her and others, alternative fashion is then a means for them to contest the belief that they have to be docile and submissive to men. For women to dress according to their own choosing, observing alternative fashion means resisting docility and male control. Dressing instead to meet their own personal objectives, the power given to conservative male authorities have weakened:

I think the way of dressing is just a continuation of the same discourse of femininity and sexuality; it's just in its public form. In Islam, it is one of your duties to your husband to look beautiful, but only to your husband. What's changed now is that women are expressing it to others and ourselves...Women are wanting to be beautiful for themselves now rather than only for their husbands. (Leila, age 29)

In the context of Iran and most Middle Eastern societies, where women have historically socialized in single-sex settings, the desire to be beautiful for themselves and to be admired by their female friends is not as new as



Leila is claiming. In fact, Iranian women have long engaged in a tradition of dressing up and beautifying themselves even when they are in all-female, heterosexual settings, and often enjoy receiving compliments from their friends and other women, which has been a socio-cultural tradition for Iranian women, long before the establishment of the Islamic Republic. However, under the new social and political context of Iran, women's clothing practices have acquired a new social meaning in its public form. As Leila's comment suggests, clothing affords women a means to consciously meet their own personal desires of beautification and self-fulfillment, not only in the privacy of their homes, but in public, too. For some women, wearing alternative fashion, applying make-up, and showing their coloured and styled hair under their pushed back veils is simply a way for them to take pleasure in their own womanhood:

I feel more like a woman in nice clothes. I want to be beautiful and attractive...not for anyone else but for myself. When I'm forced to wear the *manteaux* and the veil, I just don't get any pleasure or satisfaction from it. I want everything I wear to be nice. When you are not allowed to wear these clothes, the satisfaction that comes from wearing them is so much more. (Tallah, age 42)

For others, such as Sanaz (age 28), who was arrested for failing to adhere to dress codes and associating with a man, said that wearing alternative fashion is a way to feel sexy: "I wanted to feel sexy, you know...I could never feel sexy there [in Iran]...So dressing in such clothes was kind of like a fantasy and it's very empowering." Sanaz's comment should not be read through the common 'feminist' rhetoric that sees the use of dress and other beautifying aesthetics as serving patriarchy or dumbing women down rather than being a tool of feminine empowerment and sexual liberation. In the unique case of Iran, clothing means something entirely different than what it is often assumed elsewhere. Clothing serves a much greater social and political purpose in Iran given the highly politicized nature of women's clothing and their bodies, which we do not see on a political scale anywhere else, particularly in Europe and North America where most 'feminist' critiques of dress have come from.

Thus, we have to consider the socio-political context in which Iranian women's lives unfold in order to consider the agentic dimensions of alternative fashion. What are the social values that these clothes signify in a society where women have been subject to dress codes and bodily restrictions? What does the use of alternative fashion serve for women who have been denied their right to choose how they appear and feel internally? What does alternative fashion mean for women as they assert their visibility in the public space? What political significance is being applied to alternative fashion in light of compulsory veiling? We have to consider how, then, alternative fashion is another way through which women are responding to their identities, their gender, their sexualities, and their femininity, and the role that it is playing in advancing their social rights as it emerges as a tool of resistance against state control and ideology.

For Sanaz to want to "feel sexy" is in itself a striking contradiction to 'normative' feminine sexuality in Iran. As women's dressed bodies in the Islamic Republic are expected to personify and epitomize the docile, asexual Muslim woman, Sanaz's comment also reiterates the transformation of women's understandings about themselves and their sexualities, which is becoming more apparent and communicated through their clothing choices.<sup>20</sup> Thus, women's visibility and presence in the public realm, when dressed in alternative fashion, affords a space for a different presentation and rendition of gender and sexuality to play out (Abdmolaei 2014).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the women who participated in this study also pointed out that women dress for attention from men as well. Anna and Leila both noted their criticism of such women who dressed up to attract men.

<sup>21</sup> Beautification is not only through dress. Iran has been deemed as the 'nose job capital of the world'. Estimates of the number of procedures per year is roughly between 35,000 to 70,000 (Lenehan 2011:48). However, it is not only secular women who get such procedures done. I observed a number of men with Band-Aids on their nose, as well as young women in *chadors*.

## **(Re)Fashioning the Body Politic**

Fashion aside, women's mere bodily presence itself has disrupted the bounds of Iran's public space as a masculine realm. While women were initially expected to be absent from it, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, women have managed to plant themselves in public spaces through subtle actions such as sitting in parks, walking on the sidewalk, interacting with men, shopping, and going to restaurants. Although these actions do not appear to be socially or politically contentious, especially to those of us who live outside of Iran, such actions have claimed a particular presence of Iranian women that has defied the regime's view that women are supposed to remain in the home and outside the public presence of visibility, especially without men (Hoodfar and Ghoreishian 2012). Because of the authoritarian nature of the Islamic regime, instead of openly defying the state and social conventions through grand ideologies or large collective movements, many women have resorted to these subtle actions and everyday acts of resistance to make themselves visible and challenge the state. By doing so, women have managed to not only integrate themselves into the public realm, but break through some very uncompromising patriarchal barriers that would have been unthinkable in the first decade of the Republic (Hoodfar and Ghoreishian 2012, Kian-Thiébaud 2002). Because of women's relentlessness and informal means to challenge state dictates, Iranian women are now asserting themselves as public actors by pursuing higher education and outnumbering male enrollment, having respectable professions, and partaking in sports, among a long list of others, all the while shifting the conventional public-private divide (Bayat 2010:16-7).

Clearly, then, women's physical presence, coupled with a dressed body that does not adhere to state dress codes, ultimately defies the fundamental conception of women in both their public and private presence as ordered by the Islamic regime. Not only does alternative fashion defy state dress code ideologies that has limited women's social, sexual, and political power and granted men greater control over them, but as women dress in alternative fashion and position themselves in the public sphere, they disrupt the image of homogeneity and singular identity that the state has exhaustively worked to achieve as well. As women assert signs of

individualism and posit their own identities through their alternatively dressed bodies, the refashioning of the feminine body in the public domain is undoubtedly posing a considerable challenge to the regime. In this context, the refashioning of compulsory dress codes in Iran has emerged as a response and resistance to the state's repressive gender discourses that have been literally weaved into the fabrics of the government's Islamic attire (Abdmolaei 2014).

The women I interviewed were well aware of the challenges that the female collectivity in urban Iran are now posing. Fashion aside, their remarks have illustrated that Iranian women have come a long way since the advent of the Islamic Republic. As lawyers, doctors, graphic designers, actresses, intellectuals, architects, professors, and engineers, women are more educated, more confident, and more independent than any other period in Iran's history; a paradox of the reality of women living under a patriarchal, repressive, Islamic state. However, as women express such an assertive and independent body while dressed in alternative fashion and go about daily life in public, that very aesthetic body directly defies almost everything that the regime has aimed to make static.

## **Conclusion**

The Islamic regime has targeted women's bodies as its main "ideological battleground for control" (Mahdi 2003:67). Yet women have also put imperative emphasis on the control over their own bodies as they have reacted to the politicization of their bodies (Sadr 2012:183). Responding to the reality of being deprived of agency and individualism, subjected to the control of men, and made subject to repressive state dress codes which have aimed to regulate their gender and sexual expressions, their right to their own bodies, and access to public spaces, one way women have responded to this has been through the use of alternative fashion.

Because power lies in the ability of the state to control the outward behaviours and appearances of individuals (Varzi 2006:146), as women refashion their bodies, then, the control that the regime once wished to

have, and the social order they once envisioned for Iran, has altered. Whether women use dress to assert their independent selves, to reject the state's ideological hold over their bodies, to take control of their sexualities, to diverge from the homogenous collectivity of the Republic, or dress to define themselves and assert their own identities, women have used alternative fashion as one of the multitude of ways in which they have been subverting the identities and discourses which have been enforced on them. Although alternative fashion may not reflect our typical understandings of resistance, it is part of an endless list of everyday acts of resistance that Iranian women are utilizing in contemporary Iran to challenge their regulation. By observing alternative fashion in public, women, whether intentionally or not, transgress bodily practices by using their bodies as mechanisms of resistance rather than as passive objects of docility, undeniably slowly claiming access to their own bodies which have thus far been defined and controlled by the state.

## **Conclusion: Dressing Women's Bodies and the Continuous Struggle for Autonomy**

The politics of women's clothing in Iran has spanned nearly a century. Although the case of Iran is not unique, it is a fruitful context in the contemporary era of seeing how clothing has and continues to play an imperative function as a political institution as well as a tool of resistance and challenge in the hands of ordinary citizens. In the Islamic Republic, clothing was adopted soon after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 as a means to accelerate the new Iranian nation's Islamization, where the state had used the dressed bodies of the citizenry to help depict its national image as an Islamic revolutionary nation. Simultaneously, clothing has been utilized by the regime as a mechanism of control over the bodies and identities of ordinary citizens, particularly women, whose dressed bodies have incessantly been the battleground for various ideological regimes throughout Iran's past one hundred year history to assert, consolidate, and maintain its power—without much input or agreement from women themselves.

While under the Pahlavi state, urban women did enjoy the fruits of modernization to an extent, the discourse of "emancipation", which was to be achieved by forcefully unveiling women and coercing them to don Western-inspired attire, same with the discourse of "morality" expressed by the leaders of the Islamic regime and their re-veiling of women, undermined the actual discourse of women's liberation and morality. Instead, both regime's used women's dressed bodies as sites to undertake their political projects and to perpetuate the maintenance of patriarchal control over women's bodily movements, their appearances, opportunities, rights, identities, and sexualities. In many ways, then, the enforcement of dress, whether modern or Islamic, has worked to enforce a particular sexual order in Iranian society.

To say the least, the Islamic regime has been ruthless in their drive to construct their Ideal Muslim Woman—that is, a woman whose body is concealed, lacks aesthetic embellishment, disassociates with strange men, remains asexual, and complies to the ideological endeavor of the state, with their veiled bodies not only signifying the ideology of the state, but displaying the regime's power to define, construct, and control their bodies as well as their identities. In other words, the imposition of Islamic dress codes, while initially intended to symbolize the success of the Islamic Republic and its Islamization of a new Iran, has worked to deprive women of their agency and rights. By restructuring the social order and coercing women to literally wear ideology, the Islamic Republic aimed to instill into the female collective conscious a constant adherence to the regime's one sole version of femininity. By denouncing interactions with men and all forms of bodily presentation which reveals their hair, curves, and bare skin (other than their face and hands), along with the donning of colourful clothing or styles which challenge the long black garb of the *chador* or the modesty of the *manteaux*, the Islamic regime has attempted to ingrain into women an everlasting awareness of their appearances, including the consequences of their appearance on others as well as the nation as a whole.

But the women of Iran have proved, time and time again, that they are not passive and not easily pushed to the margins of society. Since the moment the Islamic regime attempted to tell women to observe the veil soon after the Revolution, women have been relentless in their fight to challenge and resist state mandated dress codes, finding unique and creative ways to challenge the veil and their dressed bodies. And given the incredible achievements of the women's movement, and the incredible advancements women have made, where there are more educated and more economically independent than any other point in Iranian history (Hoodfar 2008), women have rejected the regime's discourses and have refused to maintain the external image of docility by wearing the repressive discourses of the regime's dress codes. Women's use of more colours, various styles, a myriad of fabrics, and the incorporation of global trends, while asserting themselves in the contentious visibility of the Iranian public space, are

reworking the regime's repressive sexual and gendered discourses as women are asserting alternative identities of their own making; using alternative fashion as a means to oppose the invisibility and passivity which the regime has long expected of them. As women don a myriad of colours and styles, as they push back their veils to show their hair, women stand as opposite representations of the regime's Ideal Muslim Woman in both aesthetic and ideological ways.

Despite the exhaustive measures taken in attempts to eradicate and deprive women of their individual identities since childhood, one of the ways in which women have expressed their new gendered consciousness and independent selves has been through the donning of alternative dress. In doing so, they work to break away from the homogenous, collective whole to assert an independent body, and mind, of their own making, which meets their own dictates, desires, and meanings of femininity. Although a form of symbolic subversion, alternative fashion is also a highly personal matter.

While some critics have put forth their criticism of the role of alternative fashion in bringing about any considerable benefits to women's lives, I have aimed to argue in this book that the use of dress as an act of resistance and subversion must be considered alongside the socio-political context in which it is taking place, and for what motives it aims to achieve. Although such a form of resistance may not be "resistance" in the traditional sense, women's activism in Iran is marked by greater individualism anyway. Less stress appears to be placed on organizing collective action against the regime, and more emphasis is placed on more immediate and personal needs, wants, and desires as they tackle everyday life as women in Iran. Whether intentionally or not, and whether we agree with it or not, women are using, to whatever extent, their dressed bodies as mediums in the public realm to take hold of their bodies and selves which have thus far been state property and sites in which patriarchal control has been stationed. By refashioning the body, many are resisting state-foisted discourses about women in their public and private presence in so to obtain autonomy over their own identities, as well as their womanhood.



It is through the body that power and ideology prevails. While the material aspect of dress may cover the body, it is, as shown in this book, a substantially and considerably formidable instrument which can be utilized to implement a societal order that can oppress and tyrannize a population while imposing restrictive gender expectations. In the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic regime's enforcement of Islamic dress since 1980 has been intertwined in the dynamics of power and discipline, which has worked as a symbolic yet highly repressive material which has determined women's bodily mobility, their societal opportunities, and rights. It has managed, restricted, governed, and defined the lives, bodies, and sexualities of Iranian women while subjecting them to the authority and dictates of men.

While dress in the Islamic Republic has been political, it has also been very much personal. As much as the regime has attempted to use Islamic dress to their ideological advantage, many women too have realized the symbolic nature and communicative power of dress to express an opposite understanding of themselves, to assert an independent body, and to express their own agency in the social and political context of Iran. As they discard old symbols invested in the Islamic Republic's veil and refashion their bodies anew, Iranian women are using the same aesthetic materials to reclaim the very bodies and assert the very selves which the regime has worked so vigorously to control and define.

Given that the politicization of women's dress has been imperative to so many varying aspects of Iran's social, economic, religious, and political arenas, studies on women's alternative fashion can provide critical insight into women's struggles for their rights in Iran. It can also help us reflect on new forms and unconventional acts of resistance women are taking part in to challenge oppressive laws and realities. As a non-organized movement, women's alternative fashion is bound to question the rudiments of legal and moral conventions in Iran and help to further facilitate claims to gender equality.

## **Postscript**

### **Beyond Alternative Fashion: Public Unveiling and Civil Disobedience**

Since completing my research on alternative fashion, new forms of challenges against state dress codes have gained momentum in Iran over the last few years; new forms of resistance which are clearly more pronounced, and much more overt, than the subtle and rather ambiguous nature of alternative fashion. Alternative fashion emerged as a result of years and phases of challenging state dress codes, all of which have, in some way, been a form of resistance against the Islamic regime. And it has led to what we are currently witnessing at the moment in Iran—a rejection of compulsory veiling in a way that we have not seen since the very first spontaneous mass demonstration against the veil soon after the Iranian Revolution in March 1979.

Iranian women have been overtly contesting and vocalizing their opposition to compulsory veiling through many innovating means; the most widespread being alternative fashion. Yet many women have also resorted to the internet, using forums and blogs to criticize compulsory veiling through the autonomy and relative safety of cyberspace (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008). The internet has long afforded women and youth with a safe space to denounce veiling, obligatory dress codes, and other issues effecting their lived experiences in Iran. But since 2014, women's use of the internet as a political tool has gained more momentum and strength, especially since Masih Alinejad—an Iranian journalist and activist who chose exile after years of intimidation and threats of arrest, and who currently resides in the

United States—launched a Facebook page called, *My Stealthy Freedom*. Inviting Iranian women to send pictures of themselves unveiled as a way to criticize compulsory veiling, the Facebook page offered a protected space for women to publicly voice their resistance to the regime's imposition of compulsory veiling while out of reach of the Iranian state. Within a matter of only a few months, the Facebook page had collected and posted thousands of pictures of unveiled women who openly questioned the relevance of adhering to compulsory veiling and critiquing it as an insult to women's rights. Others asserted that a woman's choice to veil is up to each individual woman alone. Later, husbands, sons, and male friends began to join the campaign, shown in solidarity with unveiled women. A number of pictures also show veiled and *chador*-clad women alongside unveiled women who, together, have openly criticized the regime's expectation that all women must veil, while calling for the regime to recognize women's freedom of choice.

With the popularity of *My Stealthy Freedom* among the youth in Iran, international media outlets from The Washington Post to The Guardian published articles and conducted interviews with the group's founder. The media was of vital importance to the cause given that it drew the attention of those who would not have normally followed the issue of veiling in Iran, and it brought more attention to the plight of Iranian women, arousing much international support. The Facebook group has undoubtedly managed to bring together fragmented forms of women's resistance, helping form the basis of a widespread movement against mandatory veiling. And since 2015, the movement has helped cultivate the seeds of desire for more direct action against the regime's compulsory veiling beyond their mere use of pictures.

In many of the early pictures sent to *My Stealthy Freedom*, women often only showed the backs of their unveiled heads, holding the veil as it blew in the wind. Other pictures also showed distant photos of unveiled women who held up their veils; their faces not easily recognizable. Some also depicted women holding signs, where they wrote their critiques of compulsory veiling. But the movement against compulsory veiling has grown significantly since these online pictures, and has moved beyond *My*

*Stealthy Freedom.* Women's actions today are telling of their determination and drive to critique and eradicate compulsory veiling while bringing attention to the plight and oppression of women in Iran.

Today we see across numerous social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, including a multitude of international media networks, videos of Iranian women recording themselves speaking directly to the camera unveiled with their faces visible while they condemn compulsory veiling. Others have been openly denouncing the veil while in public, and calling for women's freedom from state dress codes. Videos also show women walking unveiled along the beach and down busy streets, with ordinary men and women walking past them.

Videos since 2017 have also shown Iranian women openly arguing with clerics, the *basiji*, and ordinary religious men and women who criticize women for not wearing the veil properly or wearing clothes that are not considered modest or Islamic. Videos show women being called sluts and immodest, while they are subject to being questioned about their morality as well as their honour, and whether if, as women, they are not embarrassed by ordinary men seeing them dressed in such ways. In return, women are shown openly yelling and standing up to citizens and religious clerics who dare criticize them and insult their dignity as they stand along public streets, wait for the subway, ride public transportation, and even wait in their cars while in traffic. A number of videos have also shown physical altercations between women and the *basiji*, as women are violently pushed into *basiji* vans upon their arrest for violating dress codes.

In order to make this more of a collective protest, some women began wearing white veils on Wednesdays while they were in public, known as White Wednesdays or #whitewednesdays; white being the colour of peace. White veils had also been taken up previously by other women who had objected to their exclusion from sport stadiums, particularly during international games. Appearing in public while donning a white veil has been met with much success given that it does not cost women politically to wear white veils. But at the same time, observing a white veil communicates how widespread the resistance to mandatory veiling has

become. Even some men have joined the White Wednesdays campaign to show their solidarity with women, as pictures have shown a number of men standing on an elevated object in public while holding white veils on sticks.

The most direct and daring challenge came in December 2017 when thirty-one year old Vida Movahed stood on top of a utility box on a busy Tehran street, where she put her scarf on a stick and waved it as if it were a flag, arousing a large crowd of onlookers who joined around her. This act was followed by several other women who subsequently posted videos of themselves engaging in similar actions as Movahed, standing on some elevated object, unveiled and silent, while hanging their veils on sticks in the middle of busy public streets. What is significant about this new movement against compulsory veiling is that it is moving from an online movement to an offline one, taking the overt and pronounced critiques against obligatory veiling from the cyberworld to the public sphere and to public spaces, where women are subject to potential punishment. As expected, the repercussions for openly contesting the veil has been much more severe and yet much more galvanizing at the same time. Many women, particularly young women, have been arrested and charged. In fact, at least twenty-nine women who are referred to as the “Girls of Revolution Street” have been arrested for appearing unveiled in public in open defiance to compulsory veiling, although they have denied the links between their actions and the White Wednesday movement.<sup>22</sup>

While it is still not known the extent of the fines and imprisonment women have received, we know that Vida Movahed has received two years in prison. Shaparak Shajarizadeh was arrested in early 2018 for removing her veil and waving it on a stick, a similar action taken by Movahed and others. While she has been sentenced to two years in prison and an eighteen-year suspended sentence, Shajarizadeh has left Iran given that she feared that Iranian authorities were “building a case against her” and she “didn’t feel

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<sup>22</sup> Osborne, Samuel. Iranian woman ‘sentenced to 20 years in prison’ for removing headscarf in protest.’ *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-woman-hijab-protest-arrest-jailed-prison-shaparak-shajarizadeh-headscarf-white-wednesdays-a8439816.html> (accessed 9.5.2018)

safe in Iran any longer.” Her lawyer, prominent human rights attorney, Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was arrested in 2010 for allegedly spreading propaganda and hurting state security, has called the ongoing arrests against women for peacefully protesting the veil as “a manifestation of violence against women.”<sup>23</sup>

Nasrin Sotoudeh has also been representing other women who have been arrested for demonstrating against compulsory veiling. Sotoudeh has said that of the twenty-nine women who have been arrested for partaking in anti-veiling demonstrations across different Iranian cities, many have been beaten at police headquarters. Nagris Housseini, one of Sotoudeh’s clients, has also been accused of indecency which may carry a jail term of ten years. Another client of Sotoudeh, Maryam Shariatmedari, was thrown down from a pillar she was standing in public by a police officer as she was holding her veil on a stick. She is currently in jail, and in need of immediate medical attention for a sprained foot she endured when the police officer pushed her. However, BBC Persia has reported that prison authorities are not providing Shariatmedari with medical assistance, according to Nasrin Sotoudeh.

Since the release of the video showing the violent attack against Shariatmedari, Shahindokht Molavardi, President Rouhani’s special assistant for civil rights, criticized unnecessary force by police on demonstrators. She tweeted: “Law obedience and civil rights is the duty of the police, and use of force against anybody in any place and time is unlawful, and executing unlawful duties is worse than unlawfulness itself.” On the other hand, official news agency, *Irana*, quoted Interior Ministry spokesperson, Salman Samani, that law enforcement forces are agents of the judiciary system and have a duty to use any lawful means to fight crime, and to prevent law-breaking individuals from escaping. However, he emphasized that all actions should be based on rule of law. As a way to

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<sup>23</sup> 2018. ‘Facing 20-year prison sentence for taking headscarf off in public, woman flees Iran’. *Center for Human Rights in Iran*. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/07/facing-20-year-prison-sentence-for-taking-headscarf-off-in-public-iranian-woman-flees-iran/> (accessed 9.5.2018)

discourage women from demonstrating against the veil, Tehran police have installed fences on utility boxes and anything elevated in public.<sup>24</sup>

While many of the women who followed similar acts have been arrested, it seems that with every arrest, women's resistance and civil disobedience has only increased, galvanizing more women to overtly contest obligatory veiling. It appears that with each arrest of women partaking in lawful, peaceful, and silent forms of protest, the act of civil disobedience and legitimacy only increases, gathering more public support for their initiatives against compulsory veiling through national and transnational social media accounts, hashtags, and international attention.



**Vida Movahed, lifting her veil in the air on Tehran's Enghelab Street  
(Photograph by Abaca Press/ Sipa USA via AP)**

This new anti-veiling campaign, which women are partaking in through various public actions, is a logical continuation of alternative fashion,

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<sup>24</sup> February 6, 2018. 'Government authorities criticized physical attacks on mandatory hijab protestors'. *BBC.com*. <http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-43193219> (accessed 12.8.2018)

especially by young women. Although we have yet to see what will come of women's initiatives, this new drive to challenge obligatory veiling in such overt, public, and direct ways is telling of the significance of women's dressed bodies in Iran. And the challenges that women face for contesting veiling and dress codes points to the politicization and contentious reality of women's clothing in the country, even in a period of great social instability and economic insecurity. At the moment, Iran is facing a long list of pressing issues: oppressive international sanctions, a collapsing currency and economy, unemployment at epic proportions, various phases of social uprisings, and yet, despite all of this, the regime has continued its abrasive, violent, oppressive, and uncompromising assault on women as they invest exhaustive amounts of resources to regulate and police their veiled bodies. We have to question why, despite such grave problems the country is facing, that the government and ordinary conservatives insist on controlling women, their dressed bodies, as well as their appearances. The recent movement against compulsory veiling by women is thus telling of the politics of women's clothing in Iran. The regime's obsession over women's dressed bodies is also telling of the reality of fear that women's unveiled bodies provoke in the country, especially in a time where women are more educated and independent than any other period in modern Iranian history.

Clothing has always mattered to the state; democratic or totalitarian, religious or secular. And as we see in Iran, regulating the dressed body has been done so for purposes of oppressing women, regulating them, and limiting their choices which have gone beyond religious justification. As we are increasingly seeing, from alternative fashion to new movements challenging compulsory veiling, clothing matters to women, too, particularly since it symbolizes the extent of their autonomy and their independent choices.



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## Glossary

**Basiji:** Basiji men and women actively monitor the activities and clothing of citizens, in both public and private spaces in Iran

**Chador:** A style of Islamic dress worn by Muslim women. The chador is a large piece of dark-coloured material which wraps around the head and body. Only the face and hands are left exposed

**Hijab:** A style of Islamic dress which covers the head of a woman, with the exception of her face. (Hijab will be used interchangeably with 'veil', the latter being the Western term for hijab)

**Islamic regime:** In this book, refers to the ruling government in Iran

**Maghneh:** Head covering worn by women

**Manteaux:** A long coat or style similar to a long dress shirt which consists of long-sleeves that is supposed to reach below women's knees. Manteuxs are expected to be loose-fitted

**Morality police:** English term for *basiji*

**Unveiling:** Refers to the event under Reza Pahlavi in which women had to discard the hijab/veil

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Women's bodies have long been a site of cultural, religious, legal, and political struggles. Recognized as a potent medium of ideological communication, women's clothing has interested both conservative and liberal states. While historical accounts have often presented women as passive objects of these political struggles waged through and on their bodies, by filtering these histories through a feminist lens, we see that women have adopted, adapted, resisted, or subverted imposed regulations of their dressed bodies, asserting their autonomy and fighting for their social and political rights. In this book, Shirin Abdmolaei helps us view the politics of women's clothing and women's rights through a historical and transnational lens. She skillfully exposes readers to women's struggles with cumbersome dress codes in Europe and North America, and guides us meaningfully through the history of dress reform in the Middle East and Muslim contexts. Next, she brings us to the heart of her subject: the politics of compulsory veiling and women's clothing in the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979. For 40 years, Iranian women have resisted compulsory veiling, a major ideological pillar of the Islamic Republic. From street protests to sit-ins, and an insistent gnawing away at the idea of the veil as modest dress, they have adopted colourful veils, fashionably worn, and alternative fashion, insisting on their own right to bodily autonomy. This book is a monumental recognition of the everyday politics of the ordinary women of Iran. It is a compelling read for scholars and advocates of women's human rights and gender equality.

Homa Hoodfar, Professor of Anthropology, Concordia University