

Struggles against the regressive proposed family law: The unlikely unity of Islamist and secular feminists in Iran

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Around a year ago, the regressive government of President Ahamadi Nezhad introduced a new family bill to the parliament which would have annulled many modest reforms that women had managed to bring about through long years of struggles in post revolution Iran (1979). An important aspect of this bill was promotion of polygamy marriages without the permission of the existing wives(s). Ironically this bill was called the family protection laws in part because it had attempted to remove a few conventional strategies (such as demanding high *Mahr*) that women had ingeniously used to obtain their divorce.

The women's groups from diverse perspectives ranging from secular to "Islamist feminists" who had never directly collaborated came together to fight against this bill. The central focus of this paper is to examine what were the conditions that had made it possible for women to work together across their ideological divides and adopt common strategies in their struggle. In order for us to appreciate the significance of this unusual collaboration, it is important to outline some of their major differences.

After the collapse of the liberal monarchy and immediately after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, it negated the modest reforms that women had secured during the first three quarters of the century. This reversal of rights has created a considerable wave of various forms of protest on the part of women. The feminist literature on the women's movement in Iran, particularly those created by scholars living outside Iran has divided women activists into two broad camps: the secular and the Islamist feminists. While the secular were assumed to promote and demand women's rights on the basis of equality of men and women and used a human rights perspective to justify their demands, the Islamist women articulated their demand of improvement of women's rights from religious perspectives.

However, those who were categorized as 'Islamist feminists' never accepted this label and never defined themselves as such. In all the interviews that have been carried out during the last few decades, they have never referred to themselves as Islamist feminist publically. The more moderate wing of these camps may present themselves as reformists or progressive religious and the most conservative of this camp would justify their activism as defenders of Islamic rights of women. On the other hand, women outside this camp may define themselves as secular only in opposition to the Islamist women and in an attempt to distance themselves from the religious groups. Yet these so-called secular women includes a range of perspectives

from left to liberal, indigenous feminists. Significantly this camp also includes many women who see themselves as Muslims but demand separation of religion from politics.

Our research and interviews with various women activists, however, indicates that while broadly speaking the women's movement(s) can be divided into two distinct camps, contrary to the claim, their differences do not stem from their level of religiosity. Rather their differences stem from their relationship and approaches to the state power structure. Many of the so called Islamist women did not adopt a religious discourse for their demands of women's equality. On the other hand, secular women in public may adopt religious discourses in support of their claim. Therefore, the distinction made between secular and Islamist women activists can hardly be justified based on their degrees of religiosity. Indeed what appears as a major difference between the two camps is their understanding of state power structure and their relation to it and not religion.

However, since in Iran the state power has intertwined with the religious ideology, the women who are close to the regime and accept its legitimacy and are close to the power structure if not within it, adopt its discourse and religious perspective in order to advance women's rights. Thus their preferred strategies are lobbying behind the seen, informally influencing the men in powerful positions, and promoting and legitimizing ideas of the more liberal and progressive religious leaders. In contrast, women who adopt a modernist critique of the Iranian state and its gender vision and policies are assumed to be secular because they question the role of political Islam and religion in public life. Clearly the so called secular women regardless of their degree of religiosity have never been close to the state and its power structures. Indeed many of them and their close family members have been victimized by the Iranian state. The main strategy of the secular women hovers around building gender consciousness, stressing the regime's discriminatory practices against women and outdated gender vision on one hand and publicizing women's demand for gender parity. They also question the state and the legitimacy of its constitution. Thus, they avoid any direct dialogue with the state because it lacks legitimacy. In short, we can summarize the differences between the two tendencies in the women's movement in Iran as follows:

- 1- The extent to which they consider the state power structure legitimate
- 2- The extent to which they may have and can access state power
- 3- Their differential strategies to protest gender discrimination and raising demands for change.
- 4- The extent and the nature of their demands for change.

These differences have been the underlying reasons for these groups of women in not coming together and forming a common front, although at times they have supported each other's claims, even if indirectly, such as demanding a universal marriage contract.

The occasion of fighting to remove this bill or at least removing the most objectionable articles of the bill has brought these women together and work within the same strategic planning. To place pressure on the government to remove the bill, they launched a post card campaign and used all possible sorts of traditional and modern media including weblogs, as well as individual strategies. The Islamist women utilized their privileged access to media and the public sphere to mobilize opposition to the family law bill. On the other hand, the secular women in an unprecedented move changed their strategies of not entering into dialogues with the state since they do not consider it legitimate. Their practical interest, as women, in preventing the draft not to be adopted encouraged them to compromise their hard stand against entering into dialogue with the state directly and participate in holding talks to members of Parliament. This was the first time that many of the secular and Islamist women were seen together in a state institution.

It is in this context that the coming together of women who are normally assumed to occupy two opposing poles and adopting similar strategies has attracted the attention of some scholars of women's movement. Our research indicates that the main cause of this unprecedented unity has been concern over polygamous marriages. Given that only 3% of Iranian marriages are polygamous, one can legitimately ask what were the underlying reasons that brought women together across their class and ideological differences to mobilize against this cause. A unity, for instance, has not taken place on the question of the women's right to divorce although the percentage of divorces and problem of lack of access to divorce is now much higher amongst women of all classes. What can be the relationship between collective and individual threats in this context?

Our findings indicate that polygamous marriages have never been historically accepted by Iranian women's culture. And it has always been assumed as an affront to their dignity. Many of the women's tales include how women took revenge in various ways against the husbands who had entered into polygamous marriages. Indeed, the very first feminist book that we have in hand from the 19th century is a critique of polygamous marriages and men's attempt to use this institution to not only sexually but also psychologically oppress women. This case has been one of the rare occasions where mere privileged access to power would not protect women from the evil of polygamous marriage.

The mere legitimacy of the institution of polygamous marriages means that it would be a threat against all women, regardless of their social and economic position or even their degree of

religiosity. This collective potential threat meant that women could mobilize collectively in pursue of their collective interest.

The question for the proponents of the women's movement is how to identify these common overarching interests and find ways of building bridges across the ideological differences in order to combat some of the most discriminatory laws in the context of Iran? This of course would have an implication for transnational women's movements as well.