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Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran

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Iranian society has changed considerably during the past twenty-seven years. While these changes are mostly visible in the appearance of the people and cities, less visible changes have also happened in traditional family norms and private life, especially where the young people are concerned. When they are acknowledged, these changes are referred to as a "generation gap" that occurred after the Islamic revolution.[1] Among young women, changes in behavior and identity are evident not only among the "misveiled" (*badhijab*) girls (those who wear *hijab* in order to accommodate themselves to Iranian legal requirements yet intentionally disregard the spirit if not precisely the letter of the law) but also among "veiled" girls (often referred to as *chadori*, whether or not they actually wear the chador). Based on research done in 2005–6 through in-depth interviews with young urban Iranian women about their private and public lives, this essay examines whether as these girls are becoming less overtly traditional they are claiming their own subjectivity. The analysis indicates that although these young women are not as docile to traditional norms as previous generations were, they can hardly be considered a radically modern generation in terms of breaking with the deeper social conventions of the past.

The surprising inner conservatism of the youth, in comparison with their public claims to modern styles of identity, reveals the misperception of two common interpretations of youth behavior. The first is that misveiling is a kind of political resistance against the Islamic regime; young women themselves characterize their style of dress as a personal choice and an indication of social rather than political identity. Therefore, although misveiling has some implications of political resistance, one can hardly interpret these new kinds of behaviors as directly oppositional. The second misperception is that removal of the veil is equal to the free expression of female sexual desire and agency; although young Iranian women (both misveiled and *chadori*) may be engaging more freely in premarital sexual relationships, they do so in a social context, which is still very much structured by the privileging of male desire over female sexual expression. Given the surprising contradictions and continuities revealed by the research, this essay looks at ways to interpret the changes that have occurred among the younger generations, especially young women, in Iran.

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1. The generation gap includes items such as youth self-identification, lifestyle, life expectancy, different visions toward history, collective action, familial relationships, politics, religion, and many others. See Ministry of Islamic Guidance, *Data Analysis of Iranians' Values and Attitudes: Generation Gap and Continuity* (Tehran: Tarh-haye Melli [National Plans], AH 1382/2003); see also *Results of Survey in Twenty-Eight Centers of Iranian Provinces: Iranians' Values and Attitudes* (Tehran: Ministry of Islamic Guidance, 2001); and *Results of Survey in Twenty-Eight Centers of Iranian Provinces: Iranians' Values and Attitudes* (Tehran: Ministry of Islamic Guidance, 2004).

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A New Generation in a Changing Society

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, many changes have occurred in the political, social, and cultural, as well as the private and public, aspects of life in Iranian society. These changes so deeply reshaped the face of the country that except for some explicit manifestations such as women's veiling, today Iran seems less Islamic than it used to. More than any other aspects, these changes are visible within youth culture and the younger generations' attitudes and behaviors. In practicing new lifestyles, which are different in many ways from the previous generations', the new generation by and large does not seem as Islamic as the ideological government had expected it to be.[2]

Iranian youth culture is a heterogeneous phenomenon, consisting of different dimensions including new styles of dress, makeup, language, music, weltanschauungs, beliefs, and identification; longer life expectancy; different heterosocial relationships; drug use; and leisure time. Despite this heterogeneity, the differences between the generations are so big as to be referred to as a generation gap.[3] The generation gap includes the misveiled girls as much as it does the *chadori* girls.[4] While in most youth studies, *chadori* girls are excluded and are assumed to be religious and loyal to the Islamic Republic, it is worth considering their experiences and the differences that exist between them and their parents regarding private and public aspects of life.

In order to understand the significance of the changes in contemporary young Iranian women's lives, it is necessary to put their generation's experiences within the historical national context. The consistencies and social transformations within more than two decades of postrevolutionary formal political policies have resulted in a younger generation that is cynical toward formal politics as well as organized social action. Their preference is for more personal social responses to their current situation, and they tend to regard their privatized individualism as a sign of their adamant modernity. But to the extent that the behaviors of today's youth are generationally distinct, they react as much against the models of the previous generations as they innovate their own social/political and cultural models.[5]

A major difference is that rather than ideological devotions, sexuality is the ideological and practical construct around which youth social identity is being shaped. This is true among not only misveiled girls but also *chadori* girls. As a misveiled girl noted, "Being misveiled generally means to feel more relaxed in relationships with boys." For *chadori* girls, refusing to be sexually molested is one of the main reasons to wear the chador. In their choices, both groups are separating themselves from the ideological typologies of the older generations. For both groups the instrumental means for making feminine personal identity is the male gaze, to which they are reacting differently.

In any case, sexuality is not, therefore, just a certain set of physical relationships among individuals. As a discourse, it has to be regarded as bodily reproduction and the construction/reconstruction of power relations in public as well as private spheres.[6] Therefore, without considering the social and political changes that have occurred in many areas of life and the youth culture as a whole, any understanding of the challenges girls face and the ways they are socially and sexually representing themselves would be incomplete.

Young people are to some extent independent subjects, but they are also socially and politically constructed. As Pierre Bourdieu argued, orientations toward actions are "structuring structures" and "structured structures." They shape and are shaped by social practices.[7] Thus

2. Despite these changes, as Charles Kurzman argues, the new generation of young women cannot be called feminists. See Charles Kurzman, "A Feminist Generation in Iran?" (working paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005).

3. *Results of Survey in Twenty-Eight Centers of Iranian Provinces* (2001) and *Results of Survey in Twenty-Eight Centers of Iranian Provinces: Iranians' Values and Attitudes* (Tehran: Ministry of Islamic Guidance, 2003).

4. Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today," *Middle East Report* 241 (2006): 22–28.

5. Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 276–322.

6. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1976).

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

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a practice does not necessarily signify actions on the basis of rational strategies but can simply be a "learned" or internalized way of doing things. That is why the younger generations' attitudes are to some extent the consequences of the new postrevolutionary political arrangements, which mostly demand that the subject/people be atomized individuals incapable of collective actions, and also as a consequence of the political arrangements that cause them to be disappointed in the revolutionary ideals, such as a just society, as had been promised at the beginning.

Younger generations are dependent on family structures and internalized actions, which are practiced within different intimate spaces. That is also why youth culture, in spite of being much more apparently tolerant, also contains some strong, exclusive, undemocratic aspects, which reinforce the power relations of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Government Politics and Policies: Social Implications

Women's participating in the Islamic revolution provided opportunities for them to feel for the first time that they were equal to men. Following the encouragement of Ayatollah Khomeini, huge numbers of women actively participated in the street protests. They felt at the time that their presence was needed for overthrowing the corrupt Pahlavi regime (1941–79), which was trying to make women depoliticized "Western dolls" (*arusak Farangi*), as the contemporary Islamist intellectual Ali Shari'ati described.[8] Ayatollah Khomeini appreciated women's participation within the revolution.[9]

The moment of revolution was liberating for women in the sense that being appropriately feminine did not mean having to avoid political activities. Unlike during the period of the Pahlavis, in which women's perfect femininity was defined as their being sexually desirable, the revolution made women feel they were not sexual objects but political agents. Having been inspired by Shari'ati's criticism of the Pahlavi regime's policy of sexualizing and depoliticizing women, many women wore *hijab*, poured into the streets, and shouted against the shah. Even secular women, while not believing in *hijab*, wore it in solidarity with other women in order to be part of that moment.[10]

However, soon after the revolution, the family code, ratified through long years of women's struggles during the first and second Pahlavi monarchies, was cancelled by Ayatollah Khomeini, who ordered it to be replaced by a very reactionary religious code. Despite his support for women's revolutionary participation, the ayatollah's hostility toward the Pahlavi regimes and their perspective toward women led him to reject their legal and juridical reforms. Thus, although the Islamic revolution welcomed women's participation as a key element for the revolution's victory, in postrevolutionary Iran women's rights were mostly ignored and the government forced women to go back to their traditional domestic roles. Such policies were partly successful, but not exactly in the way the government wished.

During the years of the Iran-Iraq war, which began immediately after the establishment of the new government, women were expected to be at the service of the country, performing their tasks as loyal wives and mothers. During the war *hijab* became another flag for the Islamic country.[11] The government indefatigably reminded the zealous Muslim of the task of defending his honor not only from the external enemies but also from the internal ones. These two concepts, namely, jihad against external and internal enemies, overlapped and legitimatized each other. A misveiled woman was likened to the Baathist enemy in the sense that both threatened (male) Muslim honor.

Along with all these changes was a shifting in the feminine symbolic models of the Islamic Republic, which has encouraged women to be domesticated objects rather than political agents. In this shift the model of Zeinab, the Prophet's granddaughter and a female warrior

8. Ali Shari'ati, *Zan* (*Woman*), in *Mamjoo'e asar* (*Collected Works*), 2nd ed., vol. 21 (Tehran: Sabz, 1983), 78.

9. Ayatollah Khomeini, *Sahifeye Nour* (*The Book of Light*) (Tehran: Ministry of Islamic Guidance, AH 1370/1991), 134.

10. Information obtained in my interviews with Iranian women in 2005–6; all translations are mine. See also Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001), xi.

11. Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan."

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figure, was gradually replaced by the model of Fatima, Zeinab's mother, whose image as represented on Islamic Republic television, in religious books, in speeches, and so on is of an utterly domesticated woman, completely docile under the demands of her husband and father. Fatima's position as a model of tradition, as reproduced by the Islamic Republic, is totally different from the position of today's young women, and she seems incapable of offering something progressive to them. Despite this, there are some strong similarities between Fatima and the young women of today's Iran. Both the traditional and the contemporary reinforce a sexualized femininity and the domestication of women.

It was in the postwar era, during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–97), that women began to wear more fashionable, colored dresses rather than chadors, long dark mantels, formal head scarves, and *maghna'ah*s (dark-colored head and neck coverings). In Iranian historical memory, these years are linked with the sudden reappearance of romantic love and the importation of some Japanese (non-Western) sentimental series on state television, all of which constituted a breakthrough for a society that had just come out of a war. The license for temporary marriage, a controversial issue during this period, was also among the major reforms promoted by Rafsanjani. He raised the issue in a Friday prayer ceremony as a solution for the psychosocial problems of youth, who nonetheless mostly continued to regard it as legal prostitution. Temporary marriage continues to be a legitimized if unpopular option to solve the sexual needs of young people, and every once in a while it is still encouraged by the bravest officials.[12] The support for temporary marriage was also a recognition of the class distinctions that appeared in the postwar era, because it was supposed to be a solution for poor people—both men and women—who faced economic obstacles in making a family through a formal marriage.[13]

Apart from all these social reforms, Rafsanjani's neoliberal policies have been criticized for providing the economic foundations for the prevailing ethics of consumerism, self-interest, and increasing personalism that seem to constitute the younger generations' major attitudes toward life. For instance, the revolutionary slogans on public spaces gradually disappeared and were replaced mostly by new commercial advertisements. The elimination of the slogans from public spaces also meant a distancing from the revolutionary period's desexualization of public spaces. In the meanwhile, Tehran and other major cities were changing rapidly as they became major draws for employment and educational opportunities for a youthful population of former peasants and residents of more provincial towns. This retreat of ideology and the commodification of many aspects of life are said to have resulted in a low interest in collective goals, especially among the younger generations, who have been most affected by the economic liberalization in the postwar era and who have become disappointed in the revolution and the promised Islamic utopia. Therefore, compared with the morality of the generations of the revolution and war and their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the people and for what they believed in, the new generation is assumed to be more personalist and hedonist.

Women's responses toward all these changes were different, ranging from public oppositions to informal politics. The important reactions of the younger generations were mostly individual strategies, among which misveiling and women's university enrollment, which exceeded the rate of men in the reform era (1997–2005) and for the first time in Iranian history, are worth mentioning.[14] Both phenomena have been indirectly and directly encouraged by the government. Misveiling was an unwanted result of the Islamic government's shifting of its gender role models for Iranian women, from Zeinab the revolutionary to Fatima the housewife.[15]

12. In June 2007, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government declared that this kind of marriage must be strongly encouraged; see *Ham Mihan*, 26 June 2007.

13. See Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993).

14. The Iranian Presidency and the Management and Planning Organization, *Quarter Century Report of the Islamic Republic Performance (1977–2001)* (Tehran: Sazmane Modiriat va Barname Rizi, 2004).

15. However, it is very surprising that despite the huge advertising of Fatima, none of the religious interviewees in my research mentioned Fatima as their role model.

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Though education was tremendously encouraged by the Islamic government, women's push for higher education was due mostly to limited job offerings and few opportunities for women's social and political participation.[16] Women's responses, however, have not been welcomed by the new conservatives and Ahmadinejad's government, whose reactions are stronger against misveiling and whose plan is to restrict women's presence in university disciplines up to 40 percent.[17] In the midst of these contradictory policies and ambivalent social changes, the expectations of young women reflect these paradoxes.

Public versus Private: The Politics of Sexuality

"The Islamic discourse in Iran has been a response to the cultural aspects of the modern world, challenging certain facets of modernity while at the same time wittingly and unwittingly engaging in some of the essential elements of the modern culture."[18] New intrusions into family and private affairs tended to take people's affairs out of traditional private or familial supervision and subjugate them to governmental discipline.[19] The Islamist project has been also inclined to homogenize and discipline sexuality on the basis of what is legitimate and illegitimate in the Sharia. This in turn has had some major impacts, including the domestication of heterosocial relations, meaning the moving of courtship from public spaces, like cinemas, restaurants, parks, and universities, into the private spaces of homes, apartments, and cars.

Domestication of heterosocial affairs appeared in postrevolutionary Iran as a result of the politicization of sexuality. What was mostly controlled by society and *urf* (social convention) before the project of Islamization became a matter of legal control and political scrutiny after the revolution. Instead of the traditional familial control that was part of social life in Iran before and after the revolution, the morality police (*gashte Amre be ma'ruf va nahy az monkar*) was launched soon after the founding of the Islamic Republic, and its task was to sweep away all nonreligious behaviors like unveiling and later *badhijabi* (veiling badly), drinking and selling alcohol, and illegitimate heterosocial and homosexual relationships.

The politicization of sexuality resulted also in a major change within Iranian families, transforming them from the traditional controlling apparatus of young people's behavior into a relatively tolerant place, where a youth could take refuge. This change also can be regarded as relocating modern social life in the conventional (as opposed to formal or legal) domain. Despite the Islamization of public spaces and the formal sphere, private and familial spaces remained relatively open and may have become even more so as a response to the closure of public alternatives. Therefore, the public prohibition of so-called illegitimate relationships led many young people to privatize their relationships and pursue their freedom in private spaces. Such a transformation was a unique phenomenon when compared with other Islamic societies, where the legal state apparatus may sponsor greater social opportunities for youth, while conventional family spaces remain more traditional.

Shifting from public into private spaces also seems to have resulted in a more precocious sexuality among the new generations. It seems that the younger generations may experience sexual affairs much sooner than the previous ones did, although such a conclusion cannot be confirmed statistically thus far. Despite the deep-seated belief of the younger generations (and also their parents) that they are socially repressed by the postrevolutionary government, it seems that the youths' claim to their own spaces and identities is much more tolerated within the household space and the conventions of family life.

The postrevolutionary politicization of the public sphere created a contrasting duality of public versus private spheres, in which

16. Golnar Mehran, "The Creation of the New Muslim Woman: Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Convergence* 23, no. 4 (1991): 42–52.

17. Daftere Motale'ate Farhangi (Cultural Studies Bureau), "A View on Budget Bill: Situation of Youth National Organization; Women and Family" (Tehran: Markaze Pajooheshshaye Majlese Shoraye Eslami [Iranian Parliament Research Center], AH 1385/2007), 13.

18. Farzin Vahdat, "Religious Modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic Democracy in the Discourse of Mohammad Khatami," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25 (2005): 650.

19. Camron Michael Amin similarly argues that Reza Shah's unveiling was an attempt to remove the supervision of women from the men in their family and to transfer that supervision to the men of the state. See Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

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people's self-representation is very much different. This difference is especially true for the less religious, who learned to accommodate the newly imposed Islamic behaviors in public but often continued conventional practices (nonrelated heterosexual mixing, playing music, dancing, consuming alcohol, etc.) in private. The overwhelming Islamic agenda thus led to the withdrawal of less Islamic behaviors from the public into the private. As a result, many Iranians live more or less a double standard owing to the different atmospheres in the different spheres and spaces of their lives. They have more freedom in the private sphere, while the public is surrounded by Islamic norms of behavior. Although in recent years many things have changed and society seems much more open than before, and despite many young people feeling relatively free to publicize their private affairs, there is still a sense of fear among the youth that does not allow them to behave freely within public spaces.

Yet the double standard of gender relations, both conventional and legal, has continued in both spheres. Whether defined as "modern" or "Islamic," attitudes that privilege men's desire and sexual agency at women's expense are held by most members of society: women and men, young and old. According to a questionnaire done by an Iranian researcher in 1997 on sexual behaviors among sixty Iranian men and women aged twenty to forty, 55 percent of Iranian men believe that in a time of sexual needs, their partner is expected to respond, whether or not she favors it. The same report holds that 81 percent of Iranian men and women believe that women must be virgins before getting married. And whereas only 15 percent of men of this questionnaire were against the idea that a man is allowed to have premarital sexual relationships, 60 percent of Iranian women completely disagreed that women or men are allowed to have premarital sexual relationships.[20] Thus, while virginity still matters seriously among Iranians, the majority of Iranian men believe that a man is allowed to have premarital relationships.

As is indicated by this research, most people believe men are less capable of controlling desire and that in the realm of sexuality a woman is much more responsible than a man, while men are allowed to be more sexually expressive than women. These beliefs are maintained whether or not they are placed within an Islamic legal framework. That is why among the younger generations virginity is still by definition an indication of women's modesty, even though the concern for its preservation is decreasing practically. Some girls are not so worried about it, viewing it as an obstacle to be managed in their relationships with boys. Anal sex, for instance, is one of the widespread ways to preserve technical virginity. However, within such relationships, the men benefit more than the women, as even within a sexual relationship, both partners may still place high ideological value on the woman's modesty, no matter what their practical relations. In addition, the domestication of sexual affairs within private spaces and the household actually increases the risks for young women, including the possibility of sexual violations, unwanted pregnancies, and unhealthy precarious abortions (given the legal restrictions on its medical practice).

The loss of virginity in a premarital relationship is not irretrievable, however, thanks to underground clinics that repair the hymen. For people with higher economic and modern social capital, virginity seems to be less problematic than it is for people with little economic capital and/or with traditional social capital. However, on this issue, there is more pressure from Iranian social conventions than from the government, which encourages temporary marriage as a solution for the sexual needs of youths. The result is a complicated situation, which is the outcome of a threefold phenomenon: the surveillance and limits placed on public spaces, which in turn have led to domesticated and precocious affairs among the youth, putting pressure on traditional family values.

Many young men, who are capable of having their own private space, tend to privatize

20. Mojgan Kahen, *Barrasiye tatbighiye masa'le jensi beyne Iraniha va Beljikiha* (*A Comparative Study on Sexual Behaviors between Iranians and Belgians*) (1997), www.iranianuk.com/article.php?id=15256.

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their affairs, keeping their relationships entirely within the confines of their own spaces. In any case, the male members of both secular and religious families are free enough to have their own affairs within the family boundaries or in their private apartments. Compared with boys, girls from both secular and religious families are less capable of hosting boys, either because they are economically less independent or because they are worried about losing their reputation and honor.

The internal realities of these relationships indicate that although many contemporary young women seem to be more liberated and modern in their behavior than are the traditional ones or the previous generations, they may also experience more dishonoring violent behaviors, given the fact that private spaces are mostly masculine and that these spaces are much less controllable either by the girls or by conventional social norms.[21] The domestication of affairs therefore seems to be more costly for young women, who are socially and economically less privileged than young men. Such intimate relationships are nonetheless power relations, in which the male members are active sexual partners, expressing their sexual desires, while female members are mostly passive and responding to their male partner's demands. This is the paradoxical duality that many modern Iranian girls face. On the one hand, the male-oriented society expects them to be sexually more open than the traditional girls are. On the other hand, this more open female sexuality is not treated by the same society as an appropriate form of feminine behavior. Being a modern girl in Iran means being trapped between tradition, which keeps them uncritical and acquiescent toward the norms and attitudes of a discriminative society, and a patriarchal modernity, which makes them more bodily expressive. The youth culture therefore has been shaped as a result of this conflictual situation.

Thus the younger generations' discourse of sexuality cannot be detached from their own embodied social representation. Though misveiled girls are to some extent behaving and representing themselves as modern in relation to the context and conditions in which Iranian girls live, they are not necessarily critical toward the traditional norms of that society, whether those norms are represented as Islamic or conventional. Therefore, on the basis of what the younger generation articulates, being misveiled does not necessarily lead to a more liberated female role in heterosocial relationships. While many of the misveiled girls seem to offer a more eroticized public self-presentation, most of them are also hesitant to challenge discriminative gender attitudes within their own experience of public and private affairs.

Having been asked why some girls dress this way, a misveiled girl answered:

> Some of them want to attract attention.
> *Then what is the difference between you and them?*
> In my opinion, the way one behaves is important. Even if I go outside like this, I don't think the people will look at me like that.
> *Have you ever attracted attention when you go outside like this?*
> Yes.
> *Then what is your reaction?*
> I don't care.

Few misveiled girls describe this kind of dressing as being in direct opposition to the Islamic government. Rather, they stress taste and personal choice, including competition with their peers, as their real motivation.

Some of the girls believe, however, that misveiling is not an appropriate means of self-presentation in public spaces, saying that "in my opinion this kind of dressing is worse than wearing nothing. I don't want to dress like this, because of attracting attention. When I dress so, I feel bad. Everybody has to have the rights of being veiled or not veiled." In phrases like this, misveiled girls make the government responsible for making them do something that otherwise they would not.

21. See Homa Hoodfar, "Iranian Women at the Intersection of Citizenship and the Family Code: The Perils of Islamic Criteria," in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 287–313.

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Strategies of Security Combined with Doubt: Being *Chadori*

Being a *chadori* in such an atmosphere is another sexual identity taken by more religious girls. It is necessary to mention, however, that the chador is losing the ideological implications it had before and after the revolution. This change has happened especially since the invention in 2002 of the so-called *chador melli* (national chador) as a solution for preventing *chadori* girls from removing their chadors. The national chador, though black, is more practically comfortable and aesthetically favored by many *chadori* girls. As a result, the ideological revolutionary ground for wearing the chador is gradually fading out.

For many *chadori* girls of the younger generation, being veiled or misveiled has to do more with "personal choice" and the insecurity of public spaces than it does with political devotion to the Islamic Republic's official ideology. Throughout the years after the revolution, women have been told by the government that *hijab* is necessary because of the insecurity of public spaces. Despite *hijab*, the threat of public insecurity has not decreased. Rather, it has been produced and reproduced by the intentional and unintentional policies of the various governments. While every generation of women complains about the insecurity of public spaces, the government has done little in this regard in terms of the practical problems of making women more comfortable and secure in public spaces. Even the government plan under Ahmadinejad to increase feelings of public security, and called a "social security program," took the form of fighting against misveiling and street thugs, thus characterizing the social security of public space as dependent on the control of women's (and some young men's) behavior in public, rather than ensuring that public space is available and socially secure for all citizens.

Many *chadori* girls prefer to wear more modest dress because, according to them, it protects them from sexual molestations in public spaces. Many of them complain of the insecurity of public spaces, which are male dominated. By wearing the chador, they can be publicly present while actually resisting the male domination of public spaces, where a woman's perceived sexuality matters greatly in how she is treated.

These *chadori* girls describe their wearing of the chador as a matter more of feeling sexually secure in public spaces and social activities than of religiosity: "Because being involved in such [university social] activities means that you have a wide contact with boys, who are not capable enough to sexually control themselves. They may allow themselves to say anything to you and behave as they wish. Wearing chador means that they don't allow themselves to do whatever they wish." According to many of these girls the "chador makes them feel secure," though for many of them wearing the chador is completely conditional. Having been asked what she would do if she were forced to choose between *hijab* and personal progress, a veiled girl answered: "In that case, I would choose my progress, not veiling." Having been asked what they would do if they were someplace where nobody cares about veiling, many *chadori* girls answered that they would remove their chador and would choose a more comfortable *hijab*.

Unlike their parents, who regarded veiling as the obvious sign of recognizing a good woman from a bad one, *chadori* girls express doubt and believe that according to God, being a good or a bad woman has little to do with *hijab*. Many who have misveiled friends also criticize the compulsory veiling mandated by the government, noting that it is "the worst way to force people to believe in Islam, because it will result in the contrary." According to one *chadori* girl who believes in *hijab* but not especially the chador: "I've been thinking about this for a while: if *hijab* is important, then why is there no punishment for that in the Koran? In the Koran there is no verse saying that when a woman doesn't preserve *hijab* she has to be forced to do it. Nothing says that in that case she has to be isolated."

Although *chadori* girls are vague about whether they have themselves chosen to be veiled, they recognize the difference between the way their mothers wear the chador and the way they do:

> *What is the difference between you and your mother in wearing the chador?*
> She believes in it. I do not. She has to do that, I do not.
> *So, why you wear the chador?*
> For girls it is a matter of being forced. Girls do not believe in it, but they're forced to do that . . .

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> because they're in religious families. They're known as religious, so, it's not easy to break the rules. People's judgment matters. My mother can't decide to put aside her chador. My father was capable of breaking norms. My mother never was.

Without recognizing the government's responsibility in creating this situation, or criticizing male domination and patriarchy, this group actually more clearly acknowledges the cultural weaknesses of Iranian gender norms. Despite this position, they still blame (misveiled) women, who according to them are responsible for the "bad situation."

Like the misveiled girls, the *chadori* girls are also trapped between traditional and modern norms. They are caught between the conventions of society on the one hand and the more individualized ambitions of self-expression on the other hand. Yet, while they wear *hijab* because of the male gaze and avoid premarital sexual relationships for fear of being exploited by boys' conflicted sexual desires, they also fail to claim their own subjectivity. Thus both groups of girls mirror each other within a limited frame of youthful feminine possibility.

Furthermore, for many *chadori* girls, wearing the chador does not necessarily mean avoiding sexual relationships. For religious *chadori* girls, what is of utmost importance is to be sure that a girl is not used by a boy. Though they are reluctant to speak about their intimate relationships, according to a few of them temporary marriage is an available means for women to have legitimate affairs. As long as they remain within the Islamic structures of legitimacy, it seems a few *chadori* girls do not care about their virginity as much as the misveiled girls do, for whom it remains the chief sign of feminine virtue. Despite this apparent flexibility, it is unclear how exactly the more religious girls deal with the practical implications of a more active feminine sexuality.

Wearing the chador for *chadori* girls is a strategy to be respected and may even provide them with a proto-feminist means of pushing back against both the conventions and Islamic norms of masculine domination.[22] It does, however, have its own inevitable costs. The chador is a public marker that provides some girls with increased security from male harassment, but it also imposes an obligation on the wearer. That is why many *chadori* girls are concerned not to do something demeaning to the chador; the garment carries its own sense of honor and vulnerability to its shaming.

Neither Islamist nor Secular: Youth as a Third Way

Regarding the social and political changes of Iranian society and the differences between younger and older generations, one may expect the youth to put a political alternative on the table. The younger generations' reaction toward the unwanted consequences of the Islamization of society, including compulsory veiling, however, is mostly the day-to-day "quiet encroachment" by individuals within the public and private spheres.[23] This quiet encroachment includes individual behaviors that are breaking the limitations and rules of traditional familial spaces while also defying the desexualizaion of public spaces imposed by the Islamic government. Such individual informal actions have been resorted to after many struggles between society and the state. Hidden language (slang or jargon), dress, makeup, hairstyles, music, and the body and sexuality have been shaped as a response to an intransigent political atmosphere. Similarly, political jokes are the main instrument of criticism and are popularly disseminated throughout the virtual spaces of the Web, on mobile phones, and in ordinary public conversation. Like the youth culture, such exchanges are mixed with ordinary pleasantries, including banal dirty jokes poking fun at provincial and ethnic groups as well as women.

The "third way" is neither secular nor traditional. It tends to mix all traditional and modern aspects of Iranian life in a more pleasant, accessible way. A good example is the appropriation in Iran of the Ashura street ceremonies, which were traditionally commemorated by religious (male) participants. In recent years, many

22. See Norma Claire Moruzzi, "Trying to Look Different: *Hejab* as the Self-Presentation of Social Distinctions" (paper presented at the Iranian Studies Conference, London, 2–7 August 2006).

23. Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movement in Iran* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1997), 7.

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boys and girls, wearing fashionable dresses and makeup, attend different public Ashura celebrations in Tehran. During these "Hussein parties," as the ceremonies are called, the boys act as the ritual participants, while the girls are involved as spectators.[24] Practicing not only different styles of language, dress, and behavior, while also using different political instruments, they blur the borders of belief and disbelief, which were so apparent for the previous generations, that is, for the main supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini and for his dissidents. Yet the question of whether this kind of informal practice is able to change the unwanted structures of society remains open. In the present situation, one may doubt whether the private practices without formal strategy are really enough.

Conclusion: Modern Choices, Old Problems

Compared with previous generations, the present younger generation in Iran seems by and large more ardent and audacious in pursuing its own interests and rights. This position is partly the consequence of the social and political developments of the postrevolutionary period and the popular experiences of and reaction to the government's programs of Islamization. Despite the external prestige of the country, the majority of Iranian people are less interested in the government's goals than in following their own individualistic interests.

The Iranian younger generation is made up of individuals who have not experienced collective political actions but have been socially constructed by the aftereffects of those actions. They have been born and raised within a national context frustrated by war, political suppression, and disappointment at the failures of a revolutionary Islamic utopia. This experience has led them to be less political than their parents and to prefer to follow their personal interests. Having experienced the combination of volatility and stasis that is the political situation of society, the younger generation is by and large more democratic than the older generations. But though young people tend to be detached from traditional rules of behavior, they are still shaped by conventional norms, and their pressures on the social limitations they experience tend to be haphazard and erratic. Most of them are not interested in pushing for more formal individual rights, mostly because of a lack of interest in organized or collective actions.

Contrary to Islamic discourse, which aimed to desexualize bodies in public spaces, bodily representation matters very much to girls. Young women struggle to construct their bodies through dieting, dress style, and makeup. In so doing, many spend a good deal of time and effort managing their bodies to make them socially presentable.[25] More so than the older generations, many Iranian girls are by and large shaping their identity through negating or accepting conventional and legal sexual discourses mixed with some modern representations.

Therefore, although Iranian youth have been quite successful in the ongoing battle over the appropriation of public space, their presence has been accepted at the expense of reinforcing certain traditional power relationships within both the public and private spheres. In particular, conventional gender relations have maintained their inequality, especially in sexual relationships, despite the apparent ability of some boys and girls to engage freely but unequally in premarital affairs.

24. Behzad Yaghmaian, *Social Change in Iran: An Eyewitness Account of Dissent, Defiance, and New Movements for Rights* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 62.

25. As Sandra Bartky argues, ideal femininity requires such radical bodily transformation that every woman is bound to fail. Thus women's material bodies are taken socially to be unnatural. This materiality should not however exist in an idealized femininity. See Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson, "Power and Desire: The Embodiment of Female Sexuality," *Feminist Review* 46 (1994): 21–38.