

# The “Sexual Revolution” in Iran: Challenging Gender Ideologies and Relations or merely Bargaining with them?

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The “sexual revolution” in Iran refers to a clandestine culture of rampant hetero-normative premarital sex and modes of hetero-social intermingling by a generation of Iranian youth that can be called as the children of the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) that enforced a strictly Islamist, conservative and oppressive regime, specially for women. The term was popularized by the Iranian-American scholar Pardis Mahdavi (2007) who concluded after her research with young adults in Tehran spread over six years that they are using sex as a tool of rebellion and making a political statement against a repressive regime by enacting a “sexual revolution”. She went as far as suggesting that the changing sexual behaviour of Iran’s youth might have the potential to be used as a substitute for political activism.

Other writers and researchers on Iran too have echoed Mahdavi’s sentiments by highlighting the contradictions and dichotomies present in the private and public lives of Iranian youth. Talattof (2011) writes about women in northern Tehran’s cosy coffee shops holding hands with their boyfriends and then walking about fully covered with downcast eyes in other parts of the city. He also points to the contradictions between “looking pious outside” and “committing ‘sins’ inside” (*ibid.*). As both Mahdavi (2007) and Talattof (2011) demonstrate, this “sexual revolution” is not just limited to having ‘illicit’ hetero-social contact and premarital sex, but also extends to modes of socialization like partying, drinking, dancing, using drugs as well as wearing the kind of clothes and makeup that are forbidden by the regime.

This paper aims to demystify the so-called “sexual revolution”. It aims to analyze if it can be called a revolution at all: in that, is it challenging existing gender relations and ideologies in Iran or is it merely negotiating with patriarchy to find small windows of freedom, largely maintaining the status-quo and male privilege? What are the causes behind the changing sexual behaviour amongst Iranian youth and what are its repercussions, especially for women? In the end, does it really carry any potential for change?

## **Background: Women in Iranian society before the 1978-79 Revolution**

In pre-revolution Iran, women attained remarkable progress in the fields of science, humanities, literature and the arts. In a shift from their previous roles as wives and mothers, confined to the private sphere; under the Pahlavi regime, women were highly encouraged to participate in the public sphere. Just before the Revolution of 1979, nearly 2000 women were employed as teachers in institutes of higher education and 800 were employed as engineers. Women even made up one third of Iran’s college students. (Shahidian, 2002)

The Family Protection law, under the Pahlavis, enabled women to seek a profession. Under this law, if a husband wanted to terminate his wife’s employment, he had to prove in a court of law that her job was in conflict with the interests of their family. Though Shahidian (*ibid.*) argues that these measures were a shift from private patriarchy to public patriarchy (Sylvia Walby, 1990), there is no denying that significant progress was made for women in terms of educational and job opportunities as well as favourable reforms in the law before the Iranian Revolution. As more and more women joined the public sphere, avenues opened up for intermingling between the sexes and thus there was a shift in the perception of sexuality from being “a sacred manifestation of marital blessing” to “a more secularized human need” (Shahidian, 2002). The importance of virginity in women continued but it became more a matter of private understanding between the couple than a public ceremony, thus also opening up the possibility for premarital sex.

However, after the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 and the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the clergymen who rose to power made a shift back to private patriarchy by restoring male privileges. Polygamy, male guardianship for women and temporary marriage were legalized again. The Family Protection Act was repealed. A mother and a wife were highlighted by the state as the ideal roles for a woman. Between 1976-1986, women’s employment decreased each year by 2% (Baqerian, 1991 quoted in Shahidian, 2002).

The *hijab* was made compulsory for women in public failing which a woman could be punished with up to seventy-four lashes or one year imprisonment. There was a ban on co-educational institutes and there was segregation of public spaces like parks, restaurants, movie theatres and beaches. In buses, women sat in the back while men sat in the front rows. Women were prohibited from singing and dancing in public and injunctions were placed on wearing makeup or anything that enhanced their physical appearance like nail polish or tight clothes. A woman charged with *zina* or adultery was to be stoned to death. (Afary, 2009)

Though a few reforms were introduced after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the socio-political climate in Iran remained largely orthodox. It is against this backdrop of state-sanctioned patriarchy and an oppressive climate for women that I aim to analyse the “sexual revolution”. However, it should be made clear at the outset that several scholars have maintained that the Iranian state was never successful in implementing completely its conservative discourse on gender relations and sexuality. Men and women have always found ways to navigate around the rules imposed by the state and “demonstrated a resistance to the dominant order that goes far beyond what Islamist reformers have articulated” (Shahidian, 2002: 271).

### **The scope for a “sexual revolution”**

Under such an oppressive regime that egregiously privileges men’s rights at the cost of women’s freedom, closely controls women’s sexuality and their bodies, and strictly limits sexuality to the realm of hetero-sexual marriage and family, is there scope for a sexual revolution, enacted by women? If yes, what would it look like? I would argue that considering how women’s bodies have been used as site of politics by the Iranian regime, there is definitely scope for sexual revolution, a movement where women not only resist the politicization and control of their bodies but also develop means of breaking free from it. From the unveiling of women by the “modernizing” state of Iran from the 1930s to 1979 to the compulsory veiling enforced after the Iranian revolution, from diktats to dress up like the modern European woman under the Shah regime to embodying an authentic Muslim Iranian woman under Ayatollah Khomeini, it has been women’s bodies and sexuality that have been regulated and manipulated according to the whims and fancies of the rulers.

Regardless of whether women were allowed to show their hair in public or not at any given point in time, one thing that has remained constant in Iran is the obsession with a woman’s hymen, “the very fine membrane called ‘honour’” (Saadawi, 1991 quoted in Farahani, 2007). Farahani points out that although the demand for virginal status for a woman at the time of her marriage predates the establishment of Islam in Iran, Islamic texts have placed great importance on the virtue of the hymen as the symbol of female virginity and honour and have emphasized male pleasure in sexual relations. A broken hymen is the sign of sexual experience and a source of

shame for the woman’s family while there has been no equivalent biological indicator for the chastity of men. On the wedding night, when the bride and the groom have sex for the first time, they are required to produce proof of the woman’s virginity to the elderly women who have gathered for the event. Although it is a fading tradition in urban areas, it is still practised among rural and lower class women.

Although social restrictions have also affected men, they have largely remained free to experiment with their sexuality outside of marriage without the need for proving themselves to be sexually inexperienced on their wedding night. In fact, the Iranian State post the revolution launched a media campaign involving radio, television, newspapers, mosques, books, pamphlets and later, the internet, that “prompted *sigher* or temporary marriage as a morally sanctioned substitute for Western dating” and “an ethically suitable alternative to masturbation and prostitution.” (Afary, 2009). What is to be noted here is that temporary marriage works to the advantage of men in that while they can end the marriage and move on to taking other temporary or permanent wives, a woman loses her value in the marriage market once she experiences sexual intercourse in a temporary marriage which is therefore seen as a disreputable institution for a woman to enter.

Thus while provisions were created for men to circumvent the regime and derive physical pleasure, women’s sexuality was regulated by the fear of severe punishment and social stigma. Mahdavi (2007) points out that the punishment for pre-marital or extra-marital sex in Iran for women is death by stoning while lesser crimes like drinking and dancing call for jail accompanied by up to 70 lashes.

In such an atmosphere, it is completely imaginable and even expected that women would develop means of resistance and rebellion against the regime. I discuss below the various changes in the sexual mores of the youth that have been clubbed as “sexual revolution” that took place post the 1990s in Iran when the generation that had been born during or after the Iranian Revolution was on the cusp of adulthood:

### **Temporary marriage and premarital sex**

In the 1990s, the Iranian society became less religious as a reaction to the Islamist state that enforced strict adherence to Islam and more inclined towards using the institution of temporary marriage to their advantage in order to circumvent the state. Girls used it to go on vacations with their boyfriends. Young men who were not financially stable enough for a real marriage used it to be with their girlfriends promising them a real marriage later. (Afary, 2009) On the whole, Iranian youth became less conservative and more accepting of premarital sex. There were also “widespread public displays of heterosexual affection, including kissing, flirting and horseplay, and even religious girls and boys hanging out together” (Moruzzi and Sadeghi, 2006).

### **Fashion**

Afary (2009) also suggests that young urban women in Iran used fashion as a “feminist tool”. They engaged in constant struggles with the morality police by wearing makeup, painting their toe nails red, streaking their hair in vibrant colours and wearing form-fitting clothes. They have also reclaimed Muharram, the festival of atonement and repentance, by dressing up in fashionable black clothing, lots of makeup and matching black nail polish and lipstick. They hold candlelight vigils on public squares while quietly distributing slips of papers with their phone numbers to men in the crowd. (Nasser 2006, Moaveni 2005 quoted in Afary, 2009) Talattof (2011) also points towards the fashion statement among young women to reveal their hair by wearing the headscarf back on their head, without making a knot under their chin, and to show a little ankle by wearing shorter pants as a sign of social resistance.

### **Parties**

Young people attend parties at friends’ houses where casual sex and drugs are commonplace (Afary 2009, Mahdavi 2007). Mahdavi presents a rather shocking and vivid picture of a 19-year old girl, Yasaman Houtri, at a party sipping on her Russian vodka martini.

*“Yasaman glances over at her best friend who is tucked away neatly under a boy on a nearby couch. The dimly-lit room is filled with other young couples who are occupied in the same activity. As she sits down, Yasaman’s purple miniskirt is pushed up so high that she catches the attention of a boy across the way. She shrugs and nonchalantly lights a cigarette after handing one to me.” (Mahdavi, 2007)*

### **Is it really a “Revolution”?**

While the afore-mentioned trends among the youth make it seem like there is indeed some kind of a “sexual revolution” brewing in Iran, the trends demand closer scrutiny and analysis to determine their potential for liberating women and bringing about social change. Below I state some of my arguments for why it might not be appropriate to term the changing sexual mores in Iran as a “sexual revolution”:

#### **The importance of hymen/virginity**

My biggest bone of contention with the “sexual revolution” in its present form is that if it were really coming from a place of feminist awakening, the first social norm it would have demolished would be the undue importance placed on women’s virginity. Instead of challenging the society’s fixation with their hymens and reclaiming their bodies, what the “revolutionaries” are doing is “performing virginity” (Farahani, 2007), thus creating spaces for having premarital sex within the patriarchal framework, letting it go unquestioned. Hymenoplasty or the restoration of hymen is a common and growing surgical procedure in Iran. Undertaken 3-7 days before the wedding, the procedure involves

reconstruction of the hymen and restoring its original appearance or then insertion into the vagina of a blood-like substance in a gelatine capsule that will hopefully burst during intercourse. (*ibid.*) Some women use simpler methods like regulating their menses by taking pills to coordinate their period with their wedding night (Afary, 2009).

While Farahani (2007) seems optimistic about “re-virginization” in that it empowers women within the existing patriarchal settings by allowing them to reclaim their virginity “on their own terms”, I see it at best as a case of “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti, 1988), or strategizing within the existing order without breaking free from it.

#### **Lack of access to contraception and safe abortion**

Mahdavi clearly states the “sexual revolution” to be a women-led revolution (2009). In that case, it is ironic that the revolution is playing out by putting women’s bodies at risk through “HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), abortion, unwanted pregnancies, and mental health concerns” (*ibid.*).

Since Iran’s sex education programs are strictly restricted to only married or engaged couples, most of the youth Mahdavi interviewed appear uninformed about the consequences of unprotected sex, multiple partners, and self-induced contraceptive pills and abortions. Very few of them report using condoms or other forms of contraception, the reason behind it being the fear of getting caught by the morality police or being found out by family members when purchasing contraceptives. As women do not have access to contraception, many of them rely on abortion in case of a pregnancy. The ones who can’t afford to see gynaecologists induce abortion by purchasing animal abortion pills from the black market. (Mahdavi, 2007)

In the face of such high-risk sexual behaviour, should it not be questioned if these women even have sexual autonomy or are in full control of their bodies and reproductive health? How can a “revolution” be built on the foundations of fear, guilt, lack of information and risk to physical and emotional well-being? Do women even benefit from such a sexual revolution or it is being steered to serve the interests of men who have little at stake and much to gain in the process?

#### **Are the causes organic or extraneous?**

In my opinion, the “sexual revolution” isn’t born out of a feminist consciousness of liberating women’s sexuality from the clutches of patriarchy. It is instead a response to socio-economic phenomena defining the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as globalization and communication revolution. After the 1990s, developing countries opened up to an influx of what Obermeyer (2000) calls a “global youth culture” through the proliferation of satellite television and internet that brought the Middle East in contact with the sexual mores of the western countries. Another factor that shaped the new sexual mores of the youth in these countries was contact with the Diaspora (in

this case, Iranian) that had settled in the West and exposed them to Western ideas of sexuality.

Similarly, as Moruzzi and Sadeghi (2006) illustrate, changes in lifestyle and dress are not necessarily acts of individual or collective resistance. Sometimes, they are just modern versions of enhancing feminine charm to entice boys. Also, girls in Iran have reported feeling tremendous peer pressure to wear shorter and tighter garments.

### Who controls these spaces and encounters?

What seems to have happened in Iran is a reversal of the traditional roles of public and private spaces for intimacy between couples. As the public space is highly monitored and regulated by the state via the morality police, expressions of physical intimacy have shifted to the private realm where the youth feel more secure and protected. As Afary (2009) points out, many middle and upper class urban parents are often complicit in these kinds of sexual encounters because at home they can shelter their children from the morality police. However, Moruzzi and Sadeghi complicate the situation by adding that parents allow more liberty to their sons than their daughters (virginity is still valued highly), thereby making sexual encounters more likely to happen in the homes of boys rather than girls. “Many contemporary young women, who seem to be so much more liberated and modern in their behaviour than previous generations, are also experiencing more sexual violence, given the fact that private spaces are still mostly under male control” (2006).

Thus, in a male-regulated private domain, what recourse does a girl have in incidents of sexual violence? It is possible that she will not report it in the first place for the fear of being found out and stigmatized by her family and the society. Even if she reports it, the law in Iran is not known to be particularly women-friendly in cases of rape and she might end up being tried and punished for premarital sex or adultery. How is a “revolution” possible when a woman has so little choice and autonomy in matters of sex and perpetually finds herself negotiating with male domination in both the private and the public sphere?

### Conclusion: if not a revolution, then what is it?

It is evident that there has been a visible shift in the lifestyle, fashion and sexual mores of the Iranian youth since the 1990s. They have become less inhibited sexually and an increasing number of them are indulging in premarital sex. Intermingling of the sexes privately, drinking and partying aren’t seen as taboos among the youth either. However, one has to be extremely cautious while labelling this rebellion of the urban youth as a “sexual revolution” against the orthodox regime. One has to not only take into account the factors such as increasing exposure to the West through television and internet that have fuelled this culture but also how it impacts men and women differently. Men, who have been traditionally privileged in matters of sexual autonomy and pleasure, find themselves in a position where they have increased cultural

acceptance of and access to premarital sex. Women, on the other hand, find themselves trapped between the supposedly “modern” discourse on sexuality where they are free to have sex outside of marriage at the risk of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and sexual abuse and the “traditional” discourse on sexuality where they are still expected to appear virgins on their wedding night. Besides, there is the danger of being caught by the morality police and an unrelenting state that bans access to sex education, contraception and safe abortion. There seems to be hardly a feminist framework that can support or guide women in making informed choices about their bodies and sexuality. Moruzzi and Sadeghi rightly call it “an Iranian sexual liberation on masculine terms” (2006).

Rather than calling it a “sexual revolution”, it will be more useful to see it through the lens of Deniz Kandiyoti’s theory of “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti, 1988). In sites of “classic patriarchy” such as Iran, women strategize within a set of concrete constraints. These patriarchal bargains determine the nature of gender ideologies in that particular context. They also influence the potential for specific forms of women’s active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression. (*ibid.*)

Thus, women do not simply break free from patriarchy, for the lack of better options, but do the best they can within the existing framework. In the case of Iran, I argued that though it creates small leeway for women to circumvent the orthodox regime but it also maintains the status-quo and leaves the existing gender relations and ideologies largely unchallenged.

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