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**Bahramitash, R. & Hooglund, E. (Eds.). *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the boundaries*. New York and London: Routledge, 2011.**

*Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the boundaries* arises from a series of conferences organized by the journal *Middle East Critique*. In the volume's introduction, editors Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund recall the large numbers of Iranian women who participated in mass rallies to challenge President Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2009. These protests, they suggest, "attracted international attention...because they were so counter to the stereotypes about Iranian society, especially with respect to the role of women, which have prevailed since the Islamic Revolution" (p. 1). *Gender in Contemporary Iran* attempts—as the subtitle denotes—not only to survey the ways in which Iranian women *are* pushing the boundaries in Iran but also to complicate stereotypical understandings of Iranian life and politics. It is noteworthy that many chapters accomplish this second goal by openly critiquing and refusing to depend upon culturalist explanations rooted in ahistorical understandings of Islam and Muslim life, which, as the editors note, have dominated international perceptions of Iranian women since the 1978-79 Revolution. The essays compiled here focus entirely on the post-revolution period, but many helpfully reach back to earlier decades and trace continuities and disjunctures in policies and attitudes surrounding Iranian women. This volume is noteworthy for its attention to the ways diverse factors—including Islamic discourses, economic status, political processes, and educational reforms—structure the possibilities of Iranian women's lives. In addition, the authors whose work is compiled here are located in academic and policy institutions both within and outside Iran, adding a breadth of insight and investment throughout the articles.

The chapters in this volume focus on discourses surrounding women in religion, law, and politics; the place of women in education, employment, and social life; changing understandings of women's roles among Iranian youth; and the impact of economic transformations on women's lives in Iran. The first chapter, by Louise Halper, argues that (p. 1) "the situation of women is impacted less by the nature of the legal region [that is, religious or secular] than by ... the salience of women to the political process and their active involvement in it" (p. 11). Halper supports this argument by focusing on changes in women's legal rights surrounding marriage and divorce. She suggests not only that women who *supported* the Islamic Republic were "the first to undertake an institutional challenge" to Iran's "patriarchal tradition" (p. 20) but also that they have been, by and large, successful in that challenge. Azadeh Kian focuses on gendered challenges to dominant readings of Shi'ism. She documents the increasing education of women into classical Islamic scholarship, an education that occurs both in the public sphere, through both reading and writing popular journal articles, and through founding and enrolling in Islamic seminaries. She also highlights the roles of progressive male Islamic scholars in Iran, who, as Mir-Hosseini and others have documented, played a significant role in rethinking the Islamic juridical paradigms on which women's rights in Iran rest. Finally, Fatemeh Etemad Moghadam provides a historical overview, from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the present, of transformations in the regulation of women's "sexuality and reproductive labor" (p. 39). She concludes that an "original Islamic ambiguity" between a wife's autonomy and a husband's ownership has become "highly contradictory and inherently unstable" under the Islamic Republic (p. 43).

The two subsequent articles, focused on higher education and women-run blogs, both engage qualitatively with Iranian women's complicated and fractured accounts of education, employment, and liberation. Goli M. Rezai-Rashti suggests that "access to higher education is

gradually transforming the nature of gender regimes in Iran” (p. 54) and points to the need for more qualitative engagement with gender relations in Iran. Niki Akhavan takes on the claim that the Iranian blogosphere represents “a site of resistance where women in particular find liberation from the state as well as from social and cultural restrictions” (p. 62). Most interestingly, Akhavan contends that “framing women’s blogging in terms that [limited their agency to the virtual arena]—that is, by framing women’s blogs as singular sites of resistance—implicitly endorses “assumptions of male-only Muslim public spheres” and elides “women’s active, multi-levelled participation in a number of areas” (p. 78). Jaleh Taheri’s chapter, “Areas of Iranian women’s voice and influence,” offers a bird’s-eye view of some of the factors discussed throughout the volume. Here, Taheri provides a summation of women’s participation in education, employment, politics, publishing, cinema, and sports.

The third section of chapters moves from a general focus on Iranian women to Iranian youth and young people’s perspectives on changing gender roles. Both Farhad Khosrokhavar and Eric Hooglund rely on interviews and observations in sites outside Iran’s metropolitan centers. Khosrokhavar investigates family dynamics and clerical authority in Qom, a conservative city that houses the major Islamic scholars in Iran as well as their seminaries. He highlights numerous differences between the habits of young people in Qom and those in Tehran and sees a considered “ambivalence” regarding the roles of previously unquestioned authorities—namely, both the father-figure and the clerical hierarchy. Hooglund’s research rests on series of trips to villages located near the metropolis Shiraz and the attitudes of village women between the ages of 16 and 22. Hooglund studies these women’s opinions on a variety of issues, from family dynamics to Iran’s nuclear program. Hooglund notes that these women come from a “new rural middle class” and that they are representative only of women who live near large cities, such as Shiraz—though he is careful to indicate that his interviewees do not represent the entirety of women’s views in these villages. All women studied here were from families who were “less strict in their religious practices” and not from those that were of a more pious disposition (p. 134). While the women Hooglund interviewed therefore speak to the educational, economic, and social transformations discussed in other chapters, their responses should not be read as representative either of Iranian women in general or village women in particular. The attitudes of rural conservative women, he argues, require additional research.

The last three chapters examine the impact of economic changes on Iranian women. Rosksana Bahramitash and Shala Kazemipour focus on statistical trends in women’s employment. They argue that despite post-revolution declines, women’s employment has since increased. Again, they reiterate an overarching theme of this volume: to “challenge essentialist views of the impact of Islam upon women and argue that such essentialized views create barriers to understanding and analysis of women’s reality in the Muslim world” (p. 136). Even when considering the decline of women’s employment following the revolution, the authors note that this decline was almost entirely rural—a situation that “makes it hard to argue that Islamism was the reason for the decline in female employment because rural Iran had been more religious before the Revolution” (p. 147). In the next chapter, Roksana Bahramitash and Zohreh Fanni focus on low-income women. The authors’ goal is to start “a preliminary discussion on the issue of shelter,” specifically the “informal, or extra-legal settlement” of the poor on unoccupied urban land (p. 151). Drawing on Asef Bayat’s research, the authors argue that “extra-legal” settlements are sites of both oppression *and* resistance. These dynamics play out differently for women than for men; however, the authors emphasize that while women in these settlements “use softer and less violent means of resistance, they are present where there is room for change” (p. 159).

Finally, Elhum Haghghat-Sordellini compares Iranian women to both those in other Middle Eastern countries and outside. Here, the situation of Iranian women is uneven—as a low birth-rate achieved through government-sponsored family planning initiatives and, consequently, a great increase in women’s higher education persist; at the same time, however, Iranian women continue to play a small role in government (though other articles in this volume will attest to the importance of women’s—perhaps more informal—political participation). Importantly, Haghghat-Sordellini echoes other articles in this volume by arguing that “women’s status is a consequence of societal and demographic changes” rather than “solely a consequence of Islam” (p. 162).

*Gender in Contemporary Iran* has many strengths, including a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies, an engagement with rigorous studies of gender and social movements in Iran, and perspectives from scholars located in Iranian institutions. Some of the articles are of uneven quality, yet this topic requires such of degree of additional research that all chapters offer welcome contributions. These readings are readily accessible to a wide variety of undergraduate readers as well as to scholars working on issues of gender in comparative contexts outside of Iranian or Middle Eastern studies.

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