# DESTABILIZING GENDER NORMS: WOMEN IN MASCULINE OCCUPATIONS IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation tackles the vastly discussed puzzle of women's low rates of labor force participation in the Middle East, using the case of Iran while focusing on an under-explored perspective. Iran has one of the lowest rates of female labor force participation in the region and marks an unstable labor market with minimum institutional supports for attracting and retaining women in the workplace. Through an in-depth exploration of the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of women within traditionally masculine careers — as a group who face most severe forms of discrimination to access those sectors that fit into their needs, interests, and backgrounds — the dissertation sheds light on the shortcomings of the dominant approaches of women's work and employment in the region in two ways. First, while women's underrepresentation in the labor market is predominantly ascribed to patriarchal states and their conservative gender ideologies, the narratives of women who participated in this research show that the mechanisms that "gender" and "sexualize" the arena of work against women are multi-faceted and multi-level, and that the concept of state patriarchy does not capture the complexities embedded in discrimination against and inequalities toward women in the workplace. Second, while liberal-feminist accounts of women's agency imagine women's empowerment only in actions or movements against incidences and manifestations of patriarchy, my analysis suggests that women can empower themselves from within patriarchal discourses by strategically cultivating them to become empowering tools for their public participation and livelihoods, particularly at work. Contextualizing the narratives of participants into the broader post-revolutionary gender discourse in Iran, the dissertation examines what constitutes the core of discrimination against women and their reactions and strategies for overturning incidents of inequality and oppression. In so doing, the dissertation draws on the experiences of women from

a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and walks of life—not solely middle-upper class, educated women, who tend to be better represented in current scholarly and political accounts of women in work.

*To my parents*

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On March 8 of 2018, Iranian women's rights activists called for public demonstrations on International Women's Day after more than a decade of relative silence. Dozens of women gathered in front of the ministry of work in Tehran, protesting discrimination against women in the labor market. The demonstration was soon violently disrupted by police, and tens of women and men were arrested. The previous months had witnessed a revitalization of public discussions surrounding women's rights and their status in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly regarding the issue of mandatory hejab following the symbolic action of dozens of urban women, who climbed tall utility boxes, platforms, and benches on busy streets or squares, pulling off their headscarves, tying them to the end of sticks, and brandishing them in protest to compulsory hejab.

In addition to the high visibility it attracted from media, the public, activists and scholars, this so-called "daughters of the revolution street" movement was alarming enough for the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, to deliver an entire speech on the issue of hejab and the Islamic model of womanhood. He gave the speech on March 9, Iranian Mother's Day, which signifies the birth of Fatemeh, the daughter of the prophet Mohammad. Calling the girls of the revolution street naive and deceived, he framed the entire movement as a foreign-initiated idea, lamenting the "outsiders" and "enemies of the Islamic republic" for falsely assuming that "Iranian women" do not support hejab. Later, a tweetstorm on his verified Twitter account reiterated the Islamic model of womanhood that had been reinforced during the years after the revolution: "a woman can have active presence and deep influence on social arenas—as Iranian women are so influential. The features of today's Iranian woman include modesty, chastity, eminence, protecting herself from abuse by men, refraining from humiliating herself

into appeasing men." In this account, he emphasized hejab as a representation of "immunity" rather than a "restriction" for women.

The image of young girls removing their hejabs in public places is undoubtedly inspiring and heartwarming and coincides with liberal-feminist idea(l)s of equality, activism, and empowerment. On the other side is the image of an aged Ayatollah and a pioneer Islamist, enforcing the idea of hejab through an ideology and policies that require women to cover their bodies, with no tangible association with individual faith. What could possibly more exemplify an image of patriarchy? This tension between the so-called Islamic versus liberal-feminist models of womanhood is not a new phenomenon. In Iran, the juxtaposition of the two models was an important part of Islamic discourse that gained political power with the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Underneath these ideological tensions and irreconcilability, however, Iran has witnessed a plethora of manifestations of women's empowerment during the years following the revolution, under the umbrella of a patriarchal state. Without the possibility of organizing strong movements that press for gender equality in different arenas and enjoying safety and protection for engaging in gender-specific civil activities, women have made astonishing changes in their living conditions (Bayat, 2009), These changes have facilitated the blossoming of this group of daughters of the revolution street movement among a post-revolutionary generation. In sum, women outnumber men in the universities, participate in the labor market, contribute to social causes, and empower their communities and families.

While current academic literature published in English provides us with invaluable insights on women's public participation, the issue of women's work and employment is relatively understudied. This is true despite the fact that one of the most unfriendly arenas for

women has been in the area of work. While women have managed to gradually adjust the state-imposed compulsory hejab to their tastes by loosening their headscarves, improving their education, maintaining public livelihoods through different activities, and improving their status in families, they remain highly underrepresented in the country's formal labor market, struggling with extremely discriminatory labor codes. Most often, the issue of women's work is addressed as one element of larger projects with regard to women's status and, most importantly, the voices of women are not represented in the academic and political evaluations of gender discrimination in the Iranian labor market.

This dissertation aims to address a part of this gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of Iranian women in those sectors of the labor market that are most unfriendly to women—the masculine sectors—using a qualitative methodology. Using the case of on-site engineering and taxi driving, both gender-atypical jobs for women, this dissertation provides an analysis of challenges facing women and their strategies for achieving empowerment and their discourses on that issue. Contextualizing the narratives of participants into a broader post-revolutionary gender discourse, the dissertation examines what constitutes the core of discrimination against women, and their reactions and strategies for overturning incidents of inequality and oppression. In so doing, the dissertation draws on the experiences of women from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and walks of life, and not just middle-upper class, educated women who tend to be better represented in current scholarly and political accounts of women in work.

Many scholars have already made this point, that to reduce women in the Muslim Middle East to being victims of religious patriarchy, is problematic; the stereotypical depictions of these women as being rendered subservient by tenets of Islam are simplistic (Mohanty, 1988;

Grünenfelder, 2012; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Keddie, 2007). However, the academic and journalistic accounts of these women still develop and perpetuate a homogenizing picture of the state's patriarchy as a major burden on women's drive toward empowerment, without delving into nuances and complexities of how inequality is manifested in women's day-to-day lives. In particular, the state's patriarchy has served as an easy explanation for low rates of labor force participation among Middle Eastern women (Soltani, 2017; Haghighat-Sordellini, 2009).

The experiences and narratives of my participants challenge those accounts that simplify the various difficulties facing women in the labor market by reducing the causes of those difficulties solely to the matter of state patriarchy and its manifestations, especially segregation. My analysis demonstrates the complexity of mechanisms and elements that render work an unfriendly arena for women. Rather than using patriarchy as the lens of analysis, I show how these jobs are constructed as masculine, not merely through discriminatory, state-imposed laws and regulations, but also through institutional and interpersonal dynamics to which the homogenizing concept of state's patriarchy does not do justice. I will show how women's work in these jobs are gendered and sexualized on a daily basis, through mechanisms that reach beyond Islamic patriarchy and state oppression.

As Patricia Collins (2000) rigorously and powerfully argues, oppression is complex and multifaceted. Structures, interpersonal dynamics, discipline, and hegemony, she argues, all serve as venues for formation and perpetuation of oppression. Structural domain — including, for example, policy, economy, laws, and legislation — establishes the foundation and parameters that determine the overall distribution of power. The disciplinary domain contains organizations and institutions that routinize and rationalize the status quo and create a specific distribution of power at work. The hegemonic domain deals with culture, consciousness, ideology, and

justification of oppression. It relies on a system based on "commonsense" that is advanced by a dominant group that infuses subjectivities by means of institutions such as religion, education, or media. Hegemony, as Gramsci has conceptualized it, deals with a dominant group molding subjects that carry out and perform desired ways of being. At the interpersonal level, oppression occurs by individual "thoughts and actions that uphold someone else's oppression" (Collins, 2000 p. 287). through day-to-day interactions in which stereotypical or incorrect assumptions about others' identities, capacities, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and so on, become constructed and reconstructed.

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve into the complex ways that gender oppression in the context of contemporary Iran is manifested at these various levels, it certainly seeks to take a step toward complicating the current conceptualizations of gender inequality in post-revolutionary Iran, particularly by extending the focus of the analysis beyond the state's patriarchy, which only tackles the structural dimension of gender inequality. Each element of Collins' conceptualization of oppression deserves attention and analysis on their own merits, and, in the context of Iran, digging into each element might require a distinct dissertation. Learning from Collins' approach with respect to oppression and the experiences of my participants, however, I intend, by using a different angle, to tackle the issue of Iranian women's social empowerment, particularly in the area of work.

Collins also teaches us that acceptance of the complex nature of oppression must come by developing "a complex notion of empowerment." Incidences and acts of oppression are embedded in our daily lives in all their mundaneness as much as they can be found in macro structures and institutions. In the same way, activism for empowerment among women covers a range of activities from individual navigation of day-to-day inequalities to collective movements.

She warns us against “labeling one form of oppression as more important than others, or one expression of activism as more radical than another” (Collins, 2000 P. 288).

The second goal of this work is to shed light on women’s daily acts of resistance against inequality and to show the complexity embedded in their collective discourse of empowerment. The stories of these women show how their strategies for and discourses of empowerment in the face of unfriendly working environments cannot be simplified to an explicit and direct backlash against inequality, as liberal-feminist accounts of empowerment prefer to observe. While bold actions such as those of the “daughters of the revolution street” dance mesh well with ideals of empowerment and therefore attract media and public attention, the day-to-day lives of women in Iran are pervaded with alternative forms of empowerment that urge us to extend our understanding of forms and manifestations of women’s empowerment beyond liberal accounts. This is not to undervalue the movements among women that explicitly and radically target the core of state patriarchy. Such actions are certainly courageous, invaluable, and influential. However, in order to achieve a realistic account of gender dynamics in post-revolutionary Iran, we need to incorporate different accounts, understandings and actions of empowerment among women as they navigate daily incidences of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. Positioned in the margins of the margins, the experiences of Iranian women who work in masculine sectors provide us with a unique opportunity to expand our theoretical understanding of the complex elements that disempower or empower women who live in patriarchal states.

These complexities cannot be captured and appreciated if we do not expand our definitions of what counts as acts of empowerment, as Collins and many other feminists have encouraged us to do (Mohanty, 1988 ; Mahmood, 2005 ; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Using the narratives and experiences of my participants, I will show how, despite what one may expect

based on the liberal definition of empowerment, women's discourse of empowerment is not necessarily contrary to the the state's gender discourse. In many senses and, interestingly, as I will argue using the case of taxi drivers, what feeds these women's discourses and strategies for empowerment intersect with state-promoted models of womanhood. Based on the narratives of my participants, I will show how women incorporate concepts of motherhood, modesty, segregation, and gender differences (all being main elements of the patriarchal state's gender discourse) to carve out empowering spaces for themselves in careers that are severely unfriendly toward women. This is not to grant any credit to a state that is based on a deeply-rooted patriarchal structure. My goal, however, is to recommend a framework for thinking about women living under patriarchal states, particularly in the Middle East and Iran, that goes beyond the reductionist "women versus state" model and recognizes the complexities of the state's approach to womanhood, as well as women's responses to its structural oppression. By so doing I intend to open a space for destabilizing the modern dichotomies (Moallem, 2005; Mahmood, 2005, Avishai, 2008; Essers et al., 2010), such as modern versus traditional; liberated versus oppressed, and agency versus patriarchy as it relates to women. These notions, along with the very concepts of womanhood and gender, are discursively constructed and contextually contingent (Foucault, 1982; Butler, 1990; Borgerson, 2005). Recognizing gender, patriarchy, and empowerment as contextualized discursive constructions, I will propose an alternative framework for describing the mechanisms that disempower women in the labor market and their strategies for navigating the conflicting worlds of work and gender (D'Enbeau et al., 2015) in the context of Iran and the Middle East in general.  In the remainder of this chapter I will delve more into feminist accounts of women's agency and empowerment and review some of the previous research on transforming meanings of these concepts based on context. I will then discuss the research

methodology and situate my positionality, as an Iranian woman, in the context of the fieldwork I conducted.

## Women, Empowerment, and Agency

The issue of women's agency has been at the core of the feminist scholarship although there are deep differences among feminists, gender scholars, and advocates of women's rights in how they understand women's agency and the way they envision acts of empowerment among them. In its origin, the feminist ideology and movement assumed a shared gender identity among all women and hoped for their collective action toward liberation from patriarchal suppression. Women's agency was to shine in its power to dismantle gender discrimination (Hekman, 1991). The feminist discourse, however, had to move away from a universal account of women's identity and agency as women of different backgrounds brought their voices and life experiences into feminist debates and complicated the very concept of womanhood (Hooks et al., 1994). Black feminism came to problematize the totalizing conceptualizations of womanhood by contextualizing expressions and experiences of being a woman at the intersections of multiple axes of suppression, especially race and "reconceptualizing all dimensions of all dialectics of oppression and activism" (Collins, 2000 P.13). It deconstructed the concept of womanhood and exposed its cultural and ideological basis by showing how oppression and domination are shaped and perpetuated through the multifaceted matrix of domination that is structured along multiple axes, not soley gender. Women's experiences were to be understood with a recognition of the heterogeneity within the category of women and intersecting nature of gender with other categories of identity — including race, nationality, class, sexuality, etc. — in creating patterns

of privilege and underprivilege among women themselves (Collins, 2000; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina, 2018; Horowitz, 2017; Hopkins, 2018).

Following a similar paradigm, tenets of post-colonial feminism argue that women's agency and their discourse of empowerment are products of intersecting identity categories and social belonging. In particular, the post-colonial feminist scholarship warns that agency among women is manifested in forms that go beyond explicit backlash against what is understood as patriarchal, as seen through a secular liberal-feminist lens (Mohanty 1988, 2003; Pande, 2015; Charania, 2008; Mahmood, 2005). While some feminists put forward universal definitions of agency as "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities" (McNay, 2000 cited by Burke, 2012), post-colonial feminist scholars like Abu Lughod (2002) contend that "we need to develop serious appreciation of differences among women in the world — as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires." Scholars of post-colonial feminism have explored manifestations of agency and empowerment practices among women that, if we limit our accounts of what empowers women to outspoken positionalities taken against patriarchal structures and institutions, do not receive the credit they deserve and even become undermined as women's participation in their own subjugation (Mahmood, 2005; Abu Loghoud, 2002; Rinaldo, 2014; Bahramitash et al., 2018; Shams, 2016; Pande, 2015; Griffith, 2000; Gatwiri and Mumbai, 2016). Among the inspirational studies within this literature are those that focus on women's experiences with conservative religious movements. From a secular-liberal perspective, conservatism and patriarchy go hand in hand and, therefore, women's observance of these religions becomes paradoxical. Unsettling the very assumption that agency is associated with a strategic subject that resists against structural suppressions (Avishai,

2008; Burke, 2012; Chong, 2006) these studies put forward alternative ways of thinking about women's agency and empowerment.

For example, in her influential work on the urban Muslim women's Mosque movement in Eygpt, Saba Mahmoud observes a "non-liberal" form of agency among these women that does not feed the "western feminist" conceptualization of women's agency. By negotiating what Mahmoud calls a "pious agency," these women find empowerment in conforming to religious ideals and a virtuoso Muslim subjectivity (Mahmood, 2005). Rinaldo (2014) talks about a form of "pious critical agency" among Muslim women activists in Indonesia, manifested in their "capacity to engage critically and publicly with religious texts" for re-interpretations that provide the discursive framework of their political activism with the intent to empower women. These women adhere to their religious beliefs and live up to their religious norms while simultaneously turning the conservative interpretations of Islamic texts on their heads and opening up space for negotiating equality from within. Avishai (2008) observes agency among orthodox Jewish Israeli women in the sense of their "doing" of religion, conceptualizing agency of these women as religious conduct. Women in her study are neither "passive targets" of religion nor "strategic agents" who seek extra-religious ends such as gender empowerment through religious observance. Religious observance rather manifests "a mode of being, a performance of religious identity, or a path to achieving orthodox subjecthood" (Avishai, 2008). And Kościańska (2009) finds that while silence is often viewed as a lack of power from a "western, liberal feminist" perspective, it constitutes the core of women's agency in participating in two fundamentalist religious movements in Poland. Both as an act of non-speaking and a behavior that signals inner humility and non-violence, silence was applied as a source of power by women to make empowering transformations in their social surroundings.

Post-colonial feminist scholars have also observed forms of agency that appear to "oppose western progressive sensibilities," (Burke, 2012) in other venues of women's lives. Pande (2015), for example, re-conceptualizes arranged marriages among the immigrant population in Britain from some South Asian countries, from a cultural practice for forcing women into patriarchal marriages, to agentic practices through which women manage to find ways around cultural expectations while taking control of their own lives. In a recent work, Bahramitash et al. (2018) show how Islamist and religious women in Iran, who are often depicted as victims of the state's patriarchy, express and perform powerful forms of agency through providing economic and in-kind aid to their communities, serving as pillars of social economy during difficult times while also belonging to very low-income households.

Along the same lines, tenets of transnational feminism show us how meanings of gender, work, agency, and empowerment shift with context (D'Enbeau et al., 2015) across cultural repertoires (Frenkel, 2008), and in addition can be the result of encounters between local and global discourses (Grünenfelder, 2013). In particular, there is a stream in this literature that explores how women whose identities are not fully produced inside the dominant western gender framework reconcile the transnational idea(l)s of gender equality with locally contextualized discourse of womanhood in ways that destabilize conventional conceptualizations of agency. In studying Muslim businesswomen in the Netherlands, for example, Essers et al. (2010) explores the intense identity work these women engage in to navigate their gendered ethnic identities within the discourse of entrepreneurship. They observe that these women "construct their identities beyond dichotomies and stereotypes such as western or non-western, local or foreign, and modern or traditional, which are often used to place them in fixed categories with respect to their identity." Similarly, in the French context, Rootham (2015) shows that female Muslim

professionals produce subjectivities that emerge from complex intersections of ethnic-religious notions of female piety and liberal-secular subjecthood. There are identities that borrow from both of these seemingly contradictory discursive domains rather than being fully produced within one in particular.

These studies and a plethora of others provide us with a theoretical basis and an analytical lens through which to recognize all manifestations of women's agency and empowerment in their great diversity. Additionally, they allow one to develop more humility toward those women, who courageously and creatively find ways around structural inequalities, but who do not necessarily engage with the collective form of anti-patriarchy movements and practices that we, as feminist scholars who are passionate about equality, would like to witness before our eyes. These approaches help us understand how agency exists "within structural and cultural limitations and not outside them" (Burke, 2012) and to turn our heads around and note how empowerment is at work underneath structural injustices that we aspire to resolve. In this sense, this dissertation speaks to post-colonial feminist scholarship, even though I have learned from a wide range of studies and theoretical traditions during the course of my research. Thus this dissertation aims to shed light on the complexities of how gender inequality is created and is sustained in the Iranian labor market, and how women engage via available pathways and discursive possibilities to creatively express their agency in the face of the institutionalized inequalities.

## Methodology

This dissertation relies on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted between July and December of 2015 in Esfahan and Tehran, the first and third major cities in Iran. My work focused on Iranian women who held traditionally masculine jobs, using "personal involvement"

(Agar, 1996, p. 119), ethnography, which allows for "telling a credible, rigorous, authentic story" and to "give voice to people in their own local context [...] as they pursue their daily lives" (Fetterman, 2009). Ethnographic fieldwork allows researchers to immerse themselves in the social environment they seek to reflect on and produce knowledge through a collaborative process with their interlocutors (Mosher et al., 2017). This knowledge emerges from interactions between the researcher and subjects and is the product of the positionality and agency of both sides (Denzin, 1999; Collins, 2000).

As a whole, my ethnography involved nearly 90 interviews with women in gender atypical jobs, in the form of one-on-one or focused group discussions; informal conversations with men and women from different backgrounds and in various occupations; an analysis of the formal discourse surrounding women's work and employment though an examination of laws, journalistic narratives, media, and officials' statements; and in-depth observations of participants' working environments. The bulk of my analysis will be based on interviews with two groups of women: drivers of women-only taxis and on-site engineers. However, my theoretical inferences are informed by all the conversations and observations I conducted over the course of my fieldwork.

I conducted 40 interviews with taxi drivers, including four focus groups of 2, 3, 5 and 30 interviews with on-site engineers, including two focus groups of 2 and 3 interviews. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to explore participants' views and lived experiences through focused questions, while simultaneously allowing the participants to make their voices heard and reflect on portions of their lives (Charmaz, 2014). These are valuable methods for understanding individuals' interpretations of social processes and their experiences with them (Weiss, 1995; Seidman, 2005; Lofland et al., 2005). Focus group discussions also are useful techniques for

understanding perceptions and experiences. They create a context for participants to engage in a moderated conversation. In focus groups the interactions between the participants and the ways they impact one another's views becomes an important part of the data (Greenbaum, 1999 P. 11).

A number of my driver participants in Tehran said that they were more comfortable being interviewed as a part of groups. Two of them voluntarily invited other colleagues to the discussions. In Esfahan, however, drivers preferred one-on-one interviews. The majority of interviews with engineers took place in Isfahan in the form of individual conversations, except for two cases in which I conducted a focus group session. I left it open to participants' preferences, although, in the end, the combination of interviews and focus groups provided a rich and unique data source that uncovered many neglected aspects of these women's problems, aspirations, and perceptions. In addition to drivers and engineers I was able to interview one truck driver, one intra-city bus driver, and six bread bakers (*nanva*).

I treated the interviews and focus group discussions as venues in which women engaged with discursive and performative work (Butler, 1990; Borgerson, 2005) to negotiate their gendered and professional identities with me in the role of researcher. I was particularly concerned with the nuances of how women reflected on and articulated their views regarding the concepts of paid work and segregation as it related to women's lives. My interview questions opened a space for participants to reflect on women's issues in the Iranian labor market as a whole, as well as beyond their particular jobs. In most of the interviews, women took advantage of the interviews to express their views on women's status in post-revolutionary Iran, and in particular their attitudes on the impact of Islamization following the revolution. Women also shared their opinions about normative gender roles and constructions of masculinity in the Iranian context. I treated women's statements as "interpretive practices" and as a basis for

analyzing how meanings of womanhood, inequality, and empowerment are produced in the particular historical and discursive contexts in which I conducted my research (Rootham, 2015; Smart, 1998; Denzin, 1996). While a bulk of journalistic narratives and some academic scholarship depict Muslim women as victims of patriarchy, by committing myself to a moral ethnography I searched for those moments in which my interlocutors “resisted those structures of oppression” (Denzin, 1999) and made changes in their personal lives from within (Burke, 2012). In response to Denzin’s well-known call for a “vulnerable” and “performative” ethnography, I aspired to simultaneously remain attentive to private and public, personal and historical, emotional and political factors during the phases of fieldwork, analysis, and writing. I intend to raise “morally informed” criticisms of the structures of gender oppression and the embedded nature of patriarchy in the political, cultural, and discursive endeavors in post-revolutionary Iran, while engaging in the “politics of hope” (Denzin, 1999) to celebrate women’s power in changing systems of gender inequality.

I recruited participants through snowballing: engineers turned out to be more accessible for interviews owing to my personal networks as a prior female engineer in Iran in addition to the social desirability that a conversation with a “gender scholar” about women’s issues in the workplace noticeably elevated among these women. My positionality, however, did not come through as an advantage for recruiting taxi drivers. These women had busy lives, driving under conditions of heat and snow on the crowded streets of Esfahan and Tehran in order to provide for themselves and their families. In between the day-to-day struggles of doing the labor of household work and taxi driving with minimal institutional supports, they barely had time to sit down and talk to me about their career challenges and aspirations. As “auntie” one of the well-

known female drivers in the local community of taxi drivers in one of Tehran's neighborhoods explained:

> *You are a dear to me but you do your interview and publish it somewhere, then others think: Wow! How great! Women are taxi drivers in Tehran and they are allowed to be taxi drivers. But no one does anything for us! We have many problems.*

After nearly one week of spending time at regular taxi stations in the city and acquiring information from male taxi drivers and taxi firms, I recruited my first participant in Tehran while visiting a taxi services company that encompassed most of the women-only taxis at the time I carried out my fieldwork. She agreed to have me in her home and invited two of her co-workers for a group interview. This was my point of entry into the network of female drivers through which I managed to interview 19 more women in their homes or in public places such as in public parks. In Esfahan, I contacted and talked with each participant during their wait time on street sides; in all cases they were called on during the interviews but kindly accepted having me in their taxis as they picked up and dropped off passengers. At such times I paused the interviews in the presence of passengers and conducted observations, while on some occasions I chatted with the passengers. In addition to women who with the women-only taxi firms, I was also able to speak with one woman in Tehran who was working as a rotating mixed-gender van driver, and briefly talk over the phone to another woman who was called "auntie" in the local community of taxi drivers and known as one of the most experienced female taxi driver in that area. While I have not used these interviews directly in the presentation of my findings, they were essential to my analysis and ability to grasp the underlying dynamics of women's entrance into taxi driving and the nuances of their experiences. As a note here, the laws and regulations are not clear about allowing women to work on mixed-gender taxis, and there are only a handful of women doing

this. There is not an articulated ban against it, while at the same time women cannot easily buy or register official mixed-gender taxis, as described by these two participants.

Taxi drivers constituted a quiet homogenous group in terms of family situation, educational level, and socio-economic background. As I will discuss further, women-only taxi firms in particular were framed as a response to the need for creating jobs for female breadwinners and women in poverty. In the early years, as some of the drivers and also officials pointed out, priority had been given to breadwinners; all drivers were asked about their family situations in recruitment interviews and some had included their divorce certificates in their applications. Therefore, the majority of my taxi driver participants were the primary or only breadwinners of their families. Except for one single participant, the rest had children. Nineteen (avoid starting sentences with numeral) were divorced, two were widowed, and 18 were married. Among the married group, only 2 were married to well-off men. The rest had husbands who were unemployed due to physical disabilities, illness, drug addiction, or bankruptcy, or who had low-income jobs.  Except for four women with some post-secondary education, the rest had a high school diploma or less. A lack of proper educational background was the main reason for many of these women to choose the physically demanding job of taxi driving.

Drivers, however, were more diverse in terms of religious convictions. This is important because as previous research has shown, religiosity is an important differentiating factor among Iranian women in terms of attitudes, experiences, and lifestyles (Bahramitash et al., 2018). While interviews did not include direct questions on religious beliefs, these issues emerged most of conversations, especially when participants discussed their views on gender segregation — even though the data did not reveal any positive correlation between religiosity and support for gender segregation. Women also differed in their practice of *Hejab* (veil); some followed more strict

forms of hejab such as *chador*[1] with all hairs and body curves covered, while others wore more relaxed outfits. Women-only taxi firms in both cities enforced specific dress codes for drivers, which included a loose *manto*[2], a long and tight scarf (*Maghnae*) and front headbands that entirely covered the hair. However, as I witnessed, especially in Isfahan, many women did not follow the code and wore their personal, routine outfits.

My sample of engineers included young women, mostly in their late 20s or early 30s, with the exception of two women who were older and more advanced in their careers. Most of these women were introduced to me through personal connections and some by institutions like the chamber of commerce, a construction engineering firm, and the research park of Isfahan's university of technology. In particular, I recruited engineers whose jobs involved site activities. Twenty-eight of interviews took place in Isfahan and two in Tehran; I interviewed most of these women in their workplaces, with the exception of three interviews which were conducted in green parks, cafes, or restaurants, plus two phone interviews. Twenty of the participants were single and the rest were engaged or married. All of the engineer participants identified themselves as middle to upper class, and except for one single woman who was living independently, the rest did not describe their work as detrimental to the economic well-being of themselves and their families.

Socioeconomic class appeared to be an essential differentiating factor between engineers and taxi drivers in terms of both experiences with work and the discursive sphere in which they

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[1] A chador is a large piece of cloth wrapped around the head and upper body. It covers the whole body except for the face.

[2] A manto is a loose shirt and a more relax form of practicing hejab. Women wear it combined with headscarves.

navigated and negotiated their gender identities at work (Rootham, 2015). Compared to taxi drivers, engineers appeared to be more homogenous in their adherence to the Islamic hejab and engagement with religious discourse, as witnessed during the interviews. Except for one woman who had a black *chador* on at her workplace, the rest wore moderately loose and relaxed outfits during the time of interviews. The spiritual and religious concepts also did not emerge during these interviews in the same way as the interviews done with drivers.

Overall, the individual interviews lasted between 30 to 100 minutes and the focus groups between 95 to 165 minutes. The interview questions revolved around women's motivations for choosing their particular jobs, their working experiences, attitudes toward women's work in Iran, gender segregation, and gender roles. All interviews were tape recorded, except for one one-on-one interview from which I took detailed notes. I manually coded and transcribed the interviews. The coding process involved two rounds of open coding to read the interviews line by line for emergent themes. This phase was followed by a round of axial coding to connect the initial codes and make theoretical inferences on how women were experiencing their work environments and their strategies for overcoming challenges. The final analysis let me explore the multi-faceted mechanisms that masculinized taxi driving and on-site engineering based on women's narratives that went well beyond state patriarchy. It further allowed me to understand the content of the discourse that women drew on to articulate their strategies for survival and empowerment.

## Conducting Ethnography Back Home

Research is not an objective reflection on reality; it is "a process of knowledge production" (Madison, 2014) in which "the biography of the researcher(s)" plays a central role (England, 1994). One's gender, economic class, nationality, race, educational background, and,

in short, one's positionality, shape the type of knowledge one produces about their subjects (Fuchs, 1992). Ethnographers cannot be detached from their subjectivity (i.e. how they understand and experience the world as a person); what they observe, hear, and learn in the field is tied to who they are as individuals (Rose, 1997; Agar, 1996). Regardless of their level of expertise in conducting research, they cannot turn into "all-understanding" observers who depict an objective picture (i.e. free from their personal values and pre-occupations) of the life of the group they study (Chattopadhyay, 2013). If this is true and research can never be detached from the "material, emotional, and intellectual" (Alford 1998, P. 21) conditions of the researcher, then an important duty for ethnographers is to scrutinize their positionality. As Rose (1997) has argued, "The need to situate knowledge is based on the argument that the sort of knowledge made depends on who its makers are."

I realize that my ethnography "moved from my biography to the biographies of others" (Denzin, 1999). Rather than a representation of my participants' experiences, this dissertation is the product of the complex interactions between me, the field, and the participants (Rose, 1997). The knowledge that I have produced in this research emerges from my particular positionality as a west-educated sociologist and a non-religious Iranian woman, belonging to the post-revolutionary generation; it is shaped by the excitement, anxieties, and vulnerabilities of going "back home" (Chattopadhyay, 2013) after some six years to conduct ethnography.

I never perceived myself as an outsider to my home country while spending the first 24 years of my life there. I traveled to Iran, imagining myself as an insider from outside—as an Iranian woman with some educational background in the United States. The majority of scholars in the West who study Iranian women belong to the pre-revolutionary generation of Iranians who left the country during or in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. This is a generation that

witnessed the revolution and the sudden shift it made in women's public life. Many of them are among the pre-revolutionary activists whose ideologies contradicted the Islamic movement and chose or were forced to leave the country after the establishment of an Islamic republic. Some are women who felt uneasy with the post-revolutionary rhetoric about womanhood and were privileged enough to immigrate and continue their education in western countries.

I, on the other hand, belong to the post-revolutionary generation. I was born to an Islamized Iran. My secondary phase of socialization happened in the post-revolutionary educational system through which the state set out to perpetuate its own ideology of womanhood among the new generation. Despite many of the "scholars in diaspora," my subjectivity is a product of the Islamic state's "technologies of power" (Foucault,1982) and the discourse and practices of day-to-day resilience against the state's systems of oppression (Bayat, 2009). My gender identity during the years at home was shaped by the confused and complex encounters between the local-Islamic discourse on gender difference and the transnational ideal(s) of equality (Lewis, 2013; Rootham, 2015). I belonged to a generation of women whose femininity was shaped by everyday navigations between the top-down dictates of the formal establishment for making us "good" Muslim women, and the bottom-up informal resilience in our communities for "undoing" state-promoted gender socializations. While formal education encouraged us to prioritize family roles over paid work, we all aspired to educate ourselves and become economically independent. While the borders between masculine and feminine domains of work and education were reinforced through laws and cultural norms, many of us aspired to transgress gender boundaries through every channel available to us. The stories of everyday oppression and resistance were no stranger to me.

The way my positionality unfolded during the fieldwork, however, was deeply impacted by my years outside Iran. Soon after starting my work I noticed that with six years of sociology education in the United States, I no longer was entitled to count myself as a complete insider. For six years I had read books and articles, mostly written by outside scholars and in English, about Iranian women and the ways their lives were impacted by the Islamic revolution. I re-learned my own life experiences in post-revolutionary Iran through what these great scholars (but mostly towards the outsider end of the spectrum) had written about Iranian women. My understanding of gender policies in Iran became reshaped through what I learned as a graduate student as imparted by more advanced sociologists. It was after starting my fieldwork that I noticed the extent to which I was socialized into an academic perspective on women in Iran. As Alford (1998) argues, “No work springs out of thin air; it is a historical product, grounded in the intellectual traditions you have absorbed, in the theories of societies you have learned” (p. 21).

I was also not well positioned to connect with major events and realities that shaped dominant public discourse, concerns, and struggles. During my fieldwork, the country’s economy shrank under the impacts of Western-imposed economic sanctions, which were meant to dismantle Iran’s nuclear program but had severe impacts on people’s lives, and there seemed to be public hopelessness with regard to economic conditions. While these sanctions were put into place in 2006, before I left the country, their impacts on ordinary people’s lives reached their peak when I was in the U.S. It was only through talking to my participants and through field observations that I could see the depth of serious economic challenges facing lower and even middle-class groups. The price of housing and merchandise were astonishingly higher than when I left, while the level of income for the lower and middle classes in formal sectors of economy had not risen proportionately. Being secure from the anxieties and hopelessness of these years, I

was disabled from fully engaging with the suffering of my participants, especially the taxi drivers, most of whom belonged to vulnerable groups.

The well-known green movement in the aftermath of the presidential election in 2009 emerged months after I had left Iran, but the memories, anger, anxieties, and pessimism toward political reform was still detrimental to how many people, particularly the political liberals and seculars, viewed the conditions and perspectives of life in Iran. Predominantly referred to as an elitist, middle-upper class movement, the trauma caused by the regime's violent suppression of the protesters — a large number of whom were women —convinced a large number of college students, young professionals, and intellectuals to leave the country. This put me in a very unbalanced power relationship (Rose, 1997) with all of my interviewees, particularly the engineers, who were hoping for or actively seeking emigration status. This was an unwanted power that, ironically, was not empowering during the fieldwork; it placed me in the uncomfortable and, in many senses, vulnerable space of being seen as advantaged. I was placed in the "space in between" (Kobayashi, 1994) where I was unable to build a coherent identity in my interactions with the participants—as an entire insider or outsider.

The chapters that follow must, therefore, be read, understood, and evaluated in relation to the complexities of my positionality. To contextualize the individual narratives of my participants within historical specificities, Chapter 2 will discuss the predominant gender discourse, its overarching characteristics, and embedded inconsistencies in post-revolutionary Iran. I will discuss how the very making of the Islamic state went hand in hand with the making of Muslim women to embody its desired gendered subjects. I will borrow from the literature on other countries in the Middle East that shows how constructions of womanhood have always been at the core of nation building projects. The chapter provides an overarching picture of the

discursive context in which women's subjectivities are shaped after the revolutions and the contradictions that the state's failure to address the needs and tastes of the diverse groups of Iranian women has created in its gender politics. In so doing, the chapter particularly discusses the state's project of gender segregation, which centers on the Islamic discourse of gender difference. It will discuss the ways spatial and social segregation became transformed from cultural practices and possibilities to create a political apparatus for controlling women's lives and bodies after the revolution. The chapter also provides evidence from officials' statements and policy changes to show that the state, as a heterogenous body, has not been consistent in its adherence to segregation as a tool of governance. It conceptualizes segregation in contemporary Iran as a matter of contestations among politicians and state officials themselves.

Chapter 3 will contextualize women's work and employment during the post-revolutionary era and reviews laws, policies and statistics related to women's work during different political periods. This chapter will show that regardless of the political environment during each period, and despite the significant changes that women witnessed in their conditions over the years, the labor market has remained one of the most inaccessible arenas to women. It will discuss the impact of local and international economic factors and their intersections with the sociopolitical atmosphere in shaping women's opportunities for finding employment in the labor market.

With the background provided in chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 4 delves into the ways those discriminative policies and discursive practices are manifested in women's day-to-day lives in the workplace and provides a detailed qualitative picture of the realities facing those women who manage to find jobs in a very tight labor market while simultaneously destabilizing state-promoted gender norms by working in traditionally masculine jobs. Drawing on the interview

data with engineers and taxi drivers, the chapter shows that an entire set of structural, institutional, and interactional factors create gendered, sexualized, and hyper-masculinized working environments for these women. The chapter also challenges those accounts that simplify all incidences of inequalities carried out against women in Iran, tying them directly to the state's Islamic patriarchy, while urging that more attention be paid to the multi-faceted nature of how gender discrimination is produced and sustained. This chapter will show how concepts of segregation, gender difference, and masculinity are manifested in women's day-to-day lives, creating consequential struggles and difficulties. It aims to provide a from-below picture of how macro-level inequalities created against women in the labor market after the revolution are lived by women on the ground. The goal, however, is not to depict these women as victims of discriminations and inequalities. I will end the chapter with a brief discussion of the engineers' strategies for achieving empowerment for maintaining their hope, aspirations, and livelihoods in their unfriendly working environments. The chapter argues that the discourse with which these women engage in order to overturn incidences of oppression in their day-to-day lives cannot be fully grasped by the liberal-feminist conceptualizations of empowerment, as their agencies and subjectivities are not produced within a Western-born discourse of gender equality.

Chapter 5 delves more into an analysis of women's discourse of empowerment by narrowing its focus to taxi drivers' data. I devote an independent chapter to taxi drives because of the amount of fascinating nuances and complexities embedded in emergence of women-only-driven taxis in Iran. In a highly male-dominated labor market with deep-rooted barriers to women's employment, particularly in male sectors, the state-promoted ideology of segregation and difference, ironically facilitated women's access to the highly masculine occupation of taxi driving. This chapter first unpacks the condition in which these taxis were created and the

rationale behind establishment of women-only taxi firms. It will then delve into the ways taxi drivers interpreted their jobs for the purpose of empowering themselves in the face of the struggles discussed in Chapter 4. Here, I will again argue that women's strategies for empowerment and their underlying discourse do not speak to liberal conceptualizations of women's agency. This chapter suggests that these women's accounts of empowerment in their jobs are heavily centered on concepts of difference, segregation, and motherhood, which, interestingly, constitute the core of state's gender discourse. The intersection and commonalities between these two discourses destabilize modern dichotomies of empowerment versus disempowerment when it comes to manifestations of Islamic gender discourse, particularly segregation. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation.

# CHAPTER 2: REMAKING NATIONS, REMAKING WOMEN

## Nation-Building, Modernization, and the Remaking of Women

The making of modern nation-states goes hand in hand with the making of subjects; this is the process through which human beings turn into subjects that embody what nations are imagined to be. In a Foucauldian sense, power operates in a positive and productive manner in the making of subjects that are governable and bodies that are docile to modalities of discipline, surveillance, and administration, or "disciplinary technologies" (See Rainbow, 1984; Foucault, 1982; Ong, 1996). For modern nation-states, individuals, their bodies, and their lives are targets of "the art of governance," as are social institutions, groups, organizations, and the collective sense of society. As Rainbow puts it, "The power of the state to produce an increasingly totalizing web of control is intertwined with and dependent on its ability to produce an increasing specification of individuality" (Rainbow, 1984 p. 22).

In the Middle East, the notion of citizenship is not as individualistic as what is seen in Western democracies; individuals are considered as members of "subnational communities," especially the family. However, individual lives are targeted by nation-states' modes of governmentality as much as collective lives (Joseph, 2017). Central to the projects of nation-state building in the post-colonial Middle East has been the regulation of the lives of men and women through re-constructing notions of gender and sexuality. Different forms of womanhood and manhood were imagined with the establishment of the new states (See Abu-Lughod, 2002) that marked the transition to a new era.

These transitions had gendered outcomes, with particular impacts on women. Formation of nation-states and the rise of nationalist ideologies in the postcolonial era were tied to the

emergence of new ways of thinking about women, their rights, and their private and public lives. Abu Lughod (1998) argues that the turn of the 20th century witnessed "an intense preoccupation" with the "women question" as nationalist movements incorporated idea(l)s of modernity in the region. In non-colonized, independent countries like Turkey and Iran, modernization was at the heart of the nationalist reforms by which the newly established regimes of Ataturk (1923-1938) and Pahlavi (1925-1979) aimed to decrease foreign control. They worked to strengthen their countries through modernizing their economic, political, educational, and cultural spheres.

Women's lives were at the heart of the modernization project. In Turkey tremendous changes were made in women's lives as a part of a top-down secularization of state and society as carried out by Ataturk. Sharia, which was the basis of family law during the Ottoman Empire, was substituted with the Swiss Civil Code in 1926. Polygamy was outlawed, and men and women were given equal rights to initiate divorce and assume custody of children. Women were granted the right to vote at the national level and modern dress codes took the place of the traditional veil in public offices and universities. The Islamic veil, as a symbol of tradition, became outlawed in public sites, including schools and universities. Women's status improved significantly as regards education and professional activities, although many of these changes occurred in urban areas.

Similar to Turkey under Ataturk, the Pahlavi regime imposed a series of top-down modernization projects, which led to radical changes in women's civil and family rights in Iran (Naghibi 1999; Faghfoory 1993; Chehabi 2007; Burki 2013). Reza Shah seized the power in the aftermath of World War I by means of a military coup which had the support of nationalists and leftists who opposed intense foreign control over internal affairs during the Qajar dynasty. In

1934, Reza Shah's visit to Turkey and his fascination with women's improved status under Ataturk's modernizing government led him to put in place a series of policies and practices that meant to ignite serious changes in women's status, including the unveiling decree of 1936 as his most radical adjustment. Modern dress codes were introduced for both men and women, and women were prohibited by law from appearing in public with veil. Reza Shah also expanded opportunities for women's education and work status. The number of primary and secondary schools for girls increased and women were granted admission into some universities. As regards paid work, opportunities became available for women to serve in gender-typed professions such as nursing and teaching. While the matter of women's veil was historically significant in drawing a line between religious and non-religious families, under Pahlavi's regime its symbolic implications became even more highlighted in signifying a transition from tradition to modernity. Unveiled women, wearing Western styles, becoming educated, and educating and nurturing future generations as mothers, teachers, or nurses, marked the state's aspiration to modernize the country (Najmabadi, 1998).

Mohammad Reza Shah, Reza Shah's son, continued his father's legacy of modernizing women's lives. Under his so called "White Revolution" in the 1960s, women gained the right to vote, and a progressive family protection law was introduced, which provided a ground for the advancement of women's rights. The new family protection law secularized marriage and divorce registration, imposed restrictions on polygamy (although polygamy was not abandoned), eased abortion penalties, increased the minimum age of marriage from 15 (increased from 9 to 15 during Reza Shah) to 18 for girls and to 20 for boys, and facilitated conditions for women to work in positions that were previously exclusive to men such as judges (Mahdi 2004). Divorce and custody of children changed from men's unquestionable right to matters of family courts'

decisions, and women's equal right to request divorce and custody was recognized. During this period the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) was established under the presidency of the Shah's sister. While a state-controlled institution, WOI played a notable role in facilitating the above-mentioned legislation.

As many scholars have argued, however, more than an attempt for warranting women's equal rights, these changes in gender politics were a part of the modernizing regime's efforts to negate the Orientalist accounts that undermined their nations as barbarians or backwards. While the legal changes in women's status in conditions that women experienced in Turkey and Iran at the turn of the century improved their status to some extent, it is well-known by scholars that top-down modernization projects marginalized women's issues in many regards (See Keddie, 2007 for a review; Moghissi 2008). In both Iran and Turkey independent women's organizations were removed and activities surrounding women's issues were channeled into state-controlled institutions. These institutions were mainly focused on women's education, health, and family roles and did not foster their political empowerment. In Iran only voices for upper and middle-class women who echoed the legitimacy of the regime were heard, and independent feminist movements were suppressed, along with other change-seeking movements such as nationalists and socialists. Also, the Westernization of dress code, educational systems, and workplaces marginalized women from religious households and reinforced inequalities not only between men and women but also among women themselves. The majority of improvements that were made benefited upper and middle-class women in urban areas, with minimal impact on rural women.

As Moghissi (2008) argues, "women's emancipation" in most of the countries in the region, "has meant the creation of a group of educated, middle-class, career-oriented women who

were expected to participate dutifully in state building while simultaneously maintaining their nurturing role as mothers and wives." This is not different from what scholars are observing in work narratives of professional women today in neoliberal economies in a developed context. Women's issues continue to be de-prioritized in the shadow of nationalist causes, and in many countries women's independent organizations are suppressed (Keddie, 2007). As reproducers of future generations, educators of the new citizens, and symbolizers of national culture, women's bodies, time, and labor are charged with nationalist ideals and visions of nation and society. The production of new nations has been intertwined with production of new women who have marked the transition to the new era (Moallem, 2005). As Kandiyoti (1988) put it, "Women bear the burden of being mothers of the nation, as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/ national groups, who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference."

In countries with a colonial history the "women" and "nation" questions were integrated. In most of these countries women played active roles in nationalist movements, united with men for the cause of independence. Women in Egypt, for example, had developed a strong and independent movement during the colonial period, which made significant contributions to Egypt's nationalist struggles, leading to the declaration of Egyptian independence in 1922. In Syria and Lebanon most women's organizations joined nationalist causes. In Algeria women bravely fought, often armed, against the French settlers. Establishment of independent nation-states brought about some improvements in women's status. Some governments, such as those in Eygpt and Tunisia, relied heavily on women's potential, encouraging their education and work to retain their support against religious and conservative movements. In Tunisia, women were granted what is known as the most progressive personal status code up to the present time,

immediately after independence, without having an independent feminist movement for advocating such changes. The state supported women's work, education, and even activism, which in practice, incorporated them into its efforts to prevent the empowerment of conservative-Islamist movements. At the same time, however, these changes did not overturn gender inequality or grant women more control over the politics of nations.

Despite the differences between countries in the region, including the way these nation-states experienced modernization, the positioning of Islamist movements, and their own political structures, one issue remains intact: the lives of women, in the private or public spheres, were seen by the developing states as a venue for implementing and showcasing projects of modernity. Modernization, either as an ideology in opposition to Islamists or to top-down, state-run projects for facilitating development, did not necessarily deliver on its promises of equality for women. On the contrary, it reinforced gendered divisions of labor and regulated women's public lives in accordance with gender roles. In Iran, Najmabadi (1998) shows that the transition from tradition to modernity went hand in hand with the "remaking" of women as managers of the domestic sphere and educators of new generations, as guardians of children's intellectual, physical, and moral development. Women were encouraged to educate themselves and assert a public presence to become "modern" wives and mothers, the types who were not limited to the domestic sphere but who would take advantage of new possibilities created for public participation (particularly in education), to become managers of the family (Najmabadi, 1998). In Egypt, Shakry (1998) shows that a shift in the discourse of motherhood marked the nationalist discourse of modernity in the post-World War I era. The idea of a scientific and rational motherhood was promoted to mark the transition to a new era, with promises of progress and development. Women were envisioned to be responsible for raising the next generation of

citizens through responsible and educated motherhood. These modernizing nationalist movements undermined traditional (Islamist) gender norms and laws as signs of backwardness, while at the same time re-envisioned the notion of womanhood and femininity along the lines of gender segregation. As Moghissi (2008) astutely observed, "While modern developmentalist states of different types invariably made some efforts to lift social and cultural barriers to women's participation in public life, and to curb the controlling power of religious leaders and fathers' authority over women's lives, more often than not they ended up solidifying gender roles and regularizing sexual discrimination, albeit on a slightly altered basis." Either by re-defining women's domestic roles to their rational and scientific responsibilities for raising the nation's children giving them the right to vote, or simply imposing modern codes of dressing, the modern nation-states in the region relied heavily on women issues as signifiers of national identity (Moghadam, 2000). To draw this discussion back to a Focauldian framework of power relationships, the changes made in women's status and the transformations made in the concept of womanhood were not simply to create structural adjustments for improving or even deteriorating women's situation. These changes were manifestations of subject-making processes for "remaking" women (Abu-Lughod, 1998) and for imagining different ways of being a woman, as modernization cannot be consummated without the modern bodies that carry out its imagined ways of being and living. These changes exemplify efforts for producing subjects that mark the transition from tradition to modernity, from the past to the future.

Similar to the modernizing nation-states in the region, the Islamic revolution and the post-revolutionary regime could not deliver its promises and imaginations of change without transforming norms of gender and sexuality and re-regulating men's and women's bodies to bear its ideal forms of subjectivity. The Islamic revolution and its aftermath imposed on women's

lives and bodies another round of "remaking," one which followed Pahlavi's modernization era—this time in the opposite direction. Imagining a new form of society and a new style of governing that were markedly different from those promised by Western capitalism or Eastern socialism, the Islamic regime imagined new models of womanhood.

## Remaking Women into Revolutionary Subjects

In the late 1970s discontent against Mohammad Reza Shah and his pro-West, pro-modernization regime, led to rising support for Ayatollah Khomeini, a charismatic Shia Muslim religious figure. With the impetus of this new movement, eventually a revolution emerged that ended two thousand years of monarchy. Modernization projects of the Pahlavi regime led to resistance on the side of Ulama and Islamic clergies, whose public roles in juridical and social systems were limited under the Shah's modernization approach. In addition, they were exposed to tight and close control by the state. The majority of Ulama, in addition to religious classes of society, demonstrated their disagreement with traces of Westernization by resisting modern dress codes and women's unveiling (Faghfoory, 1993; Chehabi, 1993).

Shah's interest in westernizing the economy and culture of the country in addition to rising poverty and economic inequality rasied popular dissatisfaction and resistance against him. The growth of income inequality (Assadzadeh and Paul 2004; Piraei and Ghanaatian 2007) mobilized the middle and lower classes against the Shah. Popular discontent against the Shah created a political vacuum, which paved the way for Khomeini to come forth with an agenda that unified the opposition, including the leftists, nationalists, and Islamists, under the banner of social and economic justice, and centered on empowerment of economically deprived groups (*mostazafin*).

Among the supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini emerged a large number of women, despite the fact that the Pahlavi's projects of modernization and Westernization resulted in some improvements in women's rights. From a liberal feminist perspective, women's participation in a revolution to overthrow a regime that was promoting Western models of gender equality became one of the most puzzling phenomena of the 1970s (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016). While Khomeini had explicitly opposed all improvements made in women's rights during Pahlavi's regime, he ironically could mobilize masses of both religious and secular women to join the revolution. Despite his prior conservative readings of Islam, which emphasized women's exclusive roles in the private sphere as mothers and wives, Khomeini presented a fundamentally different model of Islamic womanhood during the revolution, as he needed women's political support. Highlighting women's historical role in Muslim society (*ummah*) and their engagement in political matters, Khomeini encouraged women to come out of their homes and participate in demonstrations. Putting forward role models such as *Fatemeh* and *Zeinab* (the daughter and granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad) he linked women's historical role shoulder to shoulder with men in building Muslim society. As Moallem (2005) argues, Khomeini envisioned an Islamic community in which women would complement men as "veiled sisters" to their "warrior brothers."

Both *Fatemeh* and *Zeinab* were sacred historical icons in the hearts and minds of religious groups and well-respected for their political roles and leadership in building the Islamic community. Equating women's role in the Islamic revolution with such sacred figures, therefore, legitimized religious women's participation in such a public and political matter. Many religious families who resented their daughters' presence in public space, even for improved education during the Pahlavi's regime, became advocates for women's participation in revolutionary

events. This was a mission that could not be accomplished by nationalist, socialist, or feminist discourses in the Iranian context. Liberal feminists had long been writing about the public/ private division as the domain of powerful versus powerlessness in trying to facilitate women's access to the public sphere, through progressive tools such as education and employment. The revolutionary phase in Iran manifested a puzzling moment when women were mobilized to transgress boundaries from the private to public sphere through an Islamic discourse. This occurred while Islam had been traditionally understood as a burden to both gender equality and the advancement of women's rights, particularly in public arena (Charrad 2011).

The writings and speeches of Shariati, an intellectual Shia ideologist, played an important role in the mobilization of educated women against Shah's modernization and the formation of an oppositional Islamic femininity (against notions of Western femininity). Shariati introduced *Fatemeh's* femininity in opposition to traditional and Western-progressive models that were viewed as limiting women solely to her sexuality. He urged Iranian women to release their potential for building an Islamic community in which all individuals are respected for their morals rather than bodies. Many educated, modernized women voluntarily started wearing hejab following his model to demonstrate their opposition to the Shah (Naghibi 1999).

The Shah's Western-modernist discourse fell short of what the majority of women needed in their lives, which paved the way for an Islamist discourse to win over women's hearts and minds. While Pahlavi's reforms improved the public representation of upper-middle class, educated, and secular women, it did not make any serious changes in women's degree of political power (Naghibi 1999) which made the educated, middle class highly critical of the regime. The new regime's overall political repression and exacerbated income inequalities in the country downgraded the significance of equal legal rights in the eyes of many women. Such

changes made marginal impact upon the lives of the majority of women who lived in rural areas, as well as for the working class and urban poor. The labor force participation rate of women increased slowly during the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, but the new jobs that were created during these decades existed mainly for the members of the privileged class.

With women at the forefront of demonstrations, the Islamic revolution succeeded in the winter of 1979 when the Shah left the country and Khomeini ordered a referendum to establish a new regime. Subsequently, 99.3% of voters opted for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. From its inception in 1979, the issue of women has been central to discursive formation of the Islamic state in Iran (Terman, 2010; Moallem, 2005; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2016). Despite many stereotypical accounts that depict the revolutionary movement as predominantly masculine, women's participation was welcomed, encouraged, and praised. In one of his speeches in 1979 Khomeini remarked:

*You noble people witnessed for yourselves how the respected, committed women of Iran entered the arena ahead of the men to free the country from the trammels of imperial rule. We are all indebted to them for their uprising and their efforts.*

In his book, Ghamari-Tabrizi (2016) demonstrates in great detail how during the revolution and the early years after its establishment, Iranian women embodied a powerful form of female subject-hood that was not fully comprehensible by pioneering feminists of the time, such as Simon Dubuar and Kate Millett. While veiled women were depicted as victims of Islamists — in the same way as women of Iraq and Afghanistan are depicted in today's media in Western "rescue narratives" that justify U.S. foreign (Western) interference in these countries — they were actually in the center of revolutionary events and the discursive construction of an imagined society that the revolution sought to deliver. Women of different religious, educational, and economic backgrounds participated in revolutionary events as agents of change and took a stance against the objectification of women's bodies and lives by virtue of the cultural

consumerism inherent in Western modernism. Centering his historical reading of women's participation in the revolution on voices of both religious and secular female activists at the time, Ghamari-Tabrizi shows how the liberal-progressive frame of second-wave feminism lacked the conceptual tools for making sense of gender relations and the ways they were manifested in Iran's revolution. He argues that the Islamic revolution, materialized "a moment of historical rupture" that created new possibilities for gendered subjectivities to emerge. At this moment of rupture, issues such as veiling or gender segregation, as other scholars like Terman (2010), Mohatny (1998), Moallem (2005), Abu-Lughod (2015) have discussed, were far beyond being signs of repression. The revolutionary moment debunked the meanings attached to these realities by the liberal-feminist approach and showcased their empowering potentials. The post-revolutionary years, however, witnessed a myriad of controversies and, perhaps, unexpected complexities that did not allow the revolutionary aspirations of making "new" women to materialize in imagined ways.

## Remaking of Women into Spiritual Guardians of the Nation: Complexities and Controversies

The gender discourse in post-revolutionary Iran has been formed in opposition to any concept, politics, or values that were promoted by the Pahlavi regime under the projects of modernization. Feminist ideal(s) of gender equality were conceptualized as Western values and thus rejected within post-revolutionary gender politics. The Western feminine subject was depicted as hyper-sexualized and abused by capitalism while the Islamic female subject was modest and respected for her moral rather than physical values in the society (Terman 2010). In one of his speeches on Women's Day, Khomeini remarked:

*In the name of wanting to liberate women, they oppressed the women; they [the Pahlavi Regime] committed outrages against them. They dragged them down from that position of honour and esteem that they occupied, from that spiritual position that they enjoyed, making them instead mere objects […] They turned women into dolls, whereas women are human beings, great human beings.*

Khomeini saw men's and women's roles as complementary. Instead of encouraging women's entrance into men's domains, as the Western models of equality did in his view, he politicized feminine roles by conceptualizing them as women's social responsibility in relation to the nation and the revolution. Women, in his framework, are seen as essentially different from men and thus carriers of different responsibilities, with a focus on their motherhood role. In a speech on the occasion of Women's Day in 1979, for example, he declared:

*Women are the educators of society. It is from the laps of women that true human beings originate. The first stage in the development of sound men and women begins in the lap of a woman. Women are the educators of human beings. A country's success or its misfortune depends on women. If they impart sound teachings, they create (sound) human beings and a flourishing country.*

Gender difference ideology and its religious justifications continues to the present to be at the core of post-revolutionary gender politics. The current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, highlights men's and women's complementary roles and rejects the concept of gender equality as a pathway to women's empowerment. In one of his speeches in 1988 while addressing Muslim women from Iran and nine other countries, he said:

*With respect to their human values, Islam accepts the equality between men and women. With respect to their social responsibilities, however, no! Islam assigns specific responsibilities to women which are not lower than men's. We should note that the specificities of women's physical and psychological conditions prepare them for different duties [than men].*[3]

It is important to note that the difference ideology does not by itself lead to the eradication of women's participation in public life, although it has served as a ground for many

[3] http://www.rohama.org/fa/content/1805 last visited on Jan 17, 2018.

of the state's discriminatory policies against women. Rather, it undermines the perspectives that de-politicize and thus devalue private space as a domain of disempowerment for women and segregation as a tool for excluding them from the public arena. Through the difference ideology, the revolutionary and post-revolutionary gender discourse envisions an eminent status for women, higher than men's, and promises to bestow up on them their "true" position in society. This "true" position was one that protected women's bodies form over-sexualization, their labor from being exploited by capitalism, and their family status from being interrupted by breadwinning responsibilities. In the aftermath of revolution, while the state continued to rely heavily on women's volunteer labor for social causes and their work in health, education, and segregated space, it never gave up its bold emphasis on women's family roles as a duty toward the revolution and the Islamic nation. In another speech at the international conference of Women and Islamic Awakening in 2013, Khamenei stated:

*In an Islamic society, women make scientific, political, personal, and spiritual progress and remain at the forefront of the most important social causes while maintaining their feminine values. Distancing women from their womanhood and household responsibilities does not privilege them in any sense […] Undervaluing motherhood and wifehood roles does not dignify women […] the western culture ruins the family and this eventually will seize western societies.*

From a theoretical perspective it has been well-established by academic scholars that simplifying Islamization in post-revolutionary Iran as a mere suppression of women's public life is problematic, as it fails to capture the complexities of how an Islamic feminine subject was imagined. However, despite its success in mobilizing masses of women around the idea(l)s of social justice and the unique context this mobilization provided for emancipatory forms of subjectivity to emerge—ones that free men and women from exploitation of Western capitalism and Eastern socialism—the post-revolutionary politics of the Islamic state clearly failed to normalize its imagined models of femininity among all women. The Islamic state showed no

flexibility regarding issues such as compulsory hejab, family laws, and women's equal access to paid work. There has been a transition from revolutionary subject-making to down-to-the-earth policymaking for establishing an Islamic state, which had no precedent in the Muslim world and thus no pre-tested script to follow. This created a deep discord between what was imagined of women's status in Islamic society and the mundane realities of their lives, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Contradictions arose in 1982, when all women astonishingly became obligated to wear hejab despite their personal beliefs. Women also lost many of the family rights which they were granted by the Shah's reforms and they were excluded from professions such as mining, construction, or the judiciary through strict segregation policies. In addition, the government closed women's journals and marginalized female publishers (Halper 2005). Many religious women, particularly those who had developed a sense of entitlement toward the revolution due to their engagement in revolutionary events voiced against the patriarchal policies of the state in different forms, pronounced the failure of the regime to deliver justice even to religious and revolutionary women. For example, Azam Taleghani, an anti-Shah activist, a member of the first parliament elected after the revolution, and the daughter of Ayatollah Taleghani, the most popular revolutionary figure after Khomeini, signed up for her presidential candidacy in 1997. Her goal was to protest to the ban on women being eligible to serve as president following the revolution. She argued that in Islam there is no difference between men and women in their right to access positions of political power. She continued doing so in proceeding elections, joined by other women, to open up a space for public discussion around the discrimination against women in politics and to direct public attention to the issue. Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, a one-time member of parliament, the head of the women's Islamic sports federation, and the daughter of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, another

revolutionary figure close to Khomeini, caused controversy when she denounced limitations on women's biking in the public space, as published in her *Zan* newspaper.

The economic hardship facing the country due to U.S-led international sanctions and the eight years of war with Iraq also had important role in highlighting the conflicts between the models of femininity put forward by the state and the realities facing ordinary women in day-to-day life. While the state-promoted model emphasized women's roles as mothers, conceptualizing motherhood as a political responsibility for them to raise the next generation of the Islamic society, many women of, in particular, working and middle-class backgrounds simply could not afford to be fully devoted to domestic responsibilities. Women were urged to work or be present in the public sphere in order to handle matters such as banking, shopping, or children's schooling while their husbands had gone to work, in many cases double shifts, to run the family under conditions of economic hardship. Lack of opportunities for women's work and the burdens they faced in accessing the labor market despite their economic needs also became an important impetus for women acting to problematize a state gender ideology. In a recent national survey on women's expectations from the government, the majority of women viewed gender discrimination and unemployment as the main issues facing them. The same survey shows that women aspire to gain more representation in macro-level decisionmaking and to take more active roles in the public domain.

Moallem (2005) argues that such discord between the imagined Islamic female subject and how women's lives are in actuality was indeed the inevitable outcome of the uneasy encounter between modernity and Islamic fundamentalism in the manner in which it occurred in Iran's context. Islamist ideology and its success in mobilizing masses of women "put in crisis" the feminist values of gender equality by conceptualizing differences between men and women

as a source of women's honor and their empowerment in society. In return, however, the model put forward by Islamists fell into crisis due to the questions that women's demands for equality, especially in accessing the public domain posed to the state. Western egalitarian feminism failed to recognize the diversity among women, their needs, their ideals of womanhood, and the unbalanced relationships of power among them along lines of race, class, religions, and nationality. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalism in Iran did not recognize the diversity in women's ideal lives in an Islamic society promised by a revolution, for which they had made sacrifices beyond imagination.

The state struggled with ideological and political contradictions to reconcile its "transnational claims of Islamic particularities" — which aimed to put forward the Islamic Ummat as an alternative form of governing, with promises of equality for all — including the mundane technicalities of nation-state building. The revolutionary spirit created new possibilities for subjectivity to emerge or at least be imagined, a trend which unsettled the modern dichotomies of domestic versus political, public versus private, and tradition versus progressiveness, by inspiring women who were marginalized under the Pahlavi's modern regime to participate in a political matter. These were the same religious women who were deprived from participating in public spaces and instead pushed back to home due to Pahlavi's enforced Westernization. The post-revolutionary nation-building project, however, failed to bypass such dichotomies and instill its desired models of womanhood in the hearts and minds of all women. Instead of creating new forms of subjectivity and alternatives to modern ways of being and living, the state turned toward suppressing its undesired forms of subjectivity (the Western modernist) for enforcing the Islamic model. Through suppression, the state, in practice, fell back

in many ways into reinforcing the dichotomies that associated religion with tradition and (Western) modernity with progressiveness. As Moallem (2005) puts it:

*Contradictions between subject formation and agency have created unsustainable tensions that threaten the coherency of the idea of the unified will of the Islamic ummat. As it encounters the liberal subject of modernity, the Islamic subject of post-revolutionary Iran creates a crisis for both religion and modernity because the discourse of equality — that is, the will to rule in the name of the people and under the rubric of men as equal by nature — challenges the Islamic concept of ummat, which is based on the inequality of men and women"* (p. 152)

Today, there is much diversity among women and one cannot homogenize their views and experiences. Even among religious women, there are deep differences in their attitudes toward the Islamic state and expectations from living in an Islamic society (Bahramitash et al., 2018). The ideology of gender difference, however, is placed into crisis by women one way or another. Those religious women who became educated professionals and political activists owing to the Islamization of public space and the possibilities it created for women of religious households do not silently tolerate discriminatory treatment under the banner of difference ideology. Many of these women push for a re-interpretation of Islamic texts to advocate gender equality. Those secular women who never accepted the state's approach to gender issues after the revolution join international movements for advocating equality within a liberal framework of rights. Working and lower-class women whose work is central to the economic survival of their families undermine inequalities in pay and opportunities between men and women based on the difference ideology. Additionally, today's young generation of girls places their focus on individual advancement prior to starting their own families. Despite the state's heavy focus on women's family roles, the divorce rate has sharply increased in recent years and the decline of the fertility rate has raised serious concerns on the regime's side about having an aging population.

Gender segregation is one of the manifestations of the difference ideology. Because men and women are seen as essentially different in both characteristics and needs, segregation is framed as a tool for facilitating their engagement in roles that best suit them. The implications of gender segregation in women's lives and how they have dealt with it throughout the years following the revolution, however, are very complex. In some ways, segregation has benefited women and in other ways it has served as a basis for depriving them of certain resources. Regardless, it has given birth to paradoxes, or, as Shahrokni (2014) calls it, unwanted outcomes that are not fully grasped within the current literature.

**Paradoxes of Gender Segregation**

Gender segregation remains one of the most controversial issues regarding women's social lives after the revolution. In Khomeini's view, mixing of sexes was rejected as an interruption to women's true duties. In a speech he gave in 1964 (well before the revolution), Khomeini clearly rejected the mixing of sexes, even in schools and thus women's activities in masculine environments. It is a legacy that continues until today and has put severe barriers on women's engagement in male-dominated domains, especially in politics:

*Instead of looking for ways to improve the economy, to prevent the bankruptcy of the respected traders, to provide bread and water for the poor and to find employment for the young graduates and others, the ruling clique has put forward practices that lead to moral corruption, such as the employment of women teachers for boys' high schools and men teachers for girls' high schools, and insisting on employing women in government offices to spread corruption.*

After the revolution, gender became central to the construction of space and its division into categories of public and private as domains of masculinity and femininity (Massey 1994, p. 180). Women were immediately banned from certain jobs such as serving as judges or in certain engineering fields. Quota systems were also put in place that favored men in science and

engineering (Shahrokni and Dokoohaki, 2013). Schools, hospitals, recreation centers, hair salons, and many other sites became segregated, and some places such as sport stadiums or traditional coffee shops (*Ghahveh Khaneh*), became exclusively male (Bayat 2009; Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011; Mirhosseini 1999; Paidar 1995; Shahrokni 2014).

The so-called "cultural revolution" (1980-1983), which was meant to remove Western influences from universities and Islamize academia, provided a ground for segregation of universities as well. The rulebook for maintaining Islamic values and rituals in universities and academic units stipulates that female and male students must sit in separate rows in the classrooms; in populated areas in the universities men's and women's spaces should be segregated; male and female students must use laboratories, computer rooms, and workshops in different shifts as much as possible; for group projects, men and women must be assigned to different groups unless that is not possible; in the office areas of universities, the mixing of sexes must be avoided as much as possible; male officials must hire male secretaries; public spaces such as library study spaces, food courts, gyms, and dorms must be separated or used at different times for men and women; women must follow the Islamic dress codes in universities and avoid wearing tight outfits or makeup. Lastly, the rulebook maintains that men's and women's classrooms must be segregated if financial resources are available and the quality of learning is not impacted.

Previous research shows that outcomes of Islamic sex segregation for women are not homogenous. While sex segregation deprived many secular women of job opportunities and closed many doors to them, it also created more space for religious women of all socioeconomic classes to participate in public life compared to the pre-revolution period (Abigail and Shahrokni 2014; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Shahrokni 2014). In terms of work and employment, sex segregation

limited women's access to many sites of employment such as engineering, manufacturing, and transportation on one hand, but created more opportunities for them in female-only spaces as, for example, teachers, trainers, and nurses (Povey 2005).

The state, however, has not pursued a single path in reinforcing segregation. States are not homogenous constructs, and contain different and even conflicting interests in national and global contexts (Mitchell 1991). The Islamic state of Iran, too, hosts a handful of sectors, institutions, and organizations that stand differently on the conservative-liberal/progressive spectrum. There are elected and non-elected institutions, with the former being under the control of the clergy's authority, whose ultimate authority comes from the supreme leader (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). The elected institutions, particularly the presidency, parliament and their associated organizations, including the ministries, NGOs, and municipalities, are the main sites of policymaking and practices that impact women's day-to-day lives, although the non-elected Guardian consul and the supreme leader can annul changes when they are perceived as inconsistent with the Islamic values. Among them, the two organizations that directly deal with women's issues are the center for women and family affairs, headed by the vice president in women and family affairs, and the women's cultural-social council, established nearly a decade after the revolution as a subdivision to the cultural revolution council. The cultural-social council is in charge of overarching policy designs regarding women's social lives.

Until now, depending on the political parties in power, discussions about segregation have been gaining or losing momentum in political discourse and policymaking initiatives. Under conservative presidents and cabinets such as that of President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), the conservative segments of the state and institutions such as Basij gain more power to enforce segregation. For example, in 2012 a new round of quotas excluded women from 77 fields of

study in 36 universities (Shahrokni and Dokoohani, 2013). In the same period, some universities announced that they will segregate large classes, although the president placed an order to stop that. During the reform (1997-2005) and moderation (2013-2021) eras, under presidents Khatami and Rouhani respectively, women's rights activists and officials in the system enjoyed a better atmosphere through which to challenge discriminatory aspects of segregation (Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009; Moghissi 2008; Bahramitash 2007; Tahmasebi-Birgani 2010; and Paidar 1995). One recent example is President Rouhani's order in 2016 to suspend the annual state recruitment examinations for those seeking government jobs until what he saw as "unjust" and "discriminatory" gender quotas were removed (Esfandiari, 2016). In the original format, nearly one-third of the open positions were held open exclusively for men. Later in his speech, given in 2017, he addressed activists and deputies of women' affairs by saying:

*Some men believe that if it is only them in the public arena, spirituality, ethics, and everything will be maintained, but if women step into men's domains all of these will be ruined. This is not the case! Within the Islamic framework, men do not have any privilege over women.*

In an earlier speech given at the national women's conference in 2014 he emphasized that women's role cannot be limited to any specific domain, whether it is in the family or in particular types of jobs:

*There is no doubt that motherhood is a respected and elevated role. But do men forget their fatherhood roles by pursuing social activities? Women too can reconcile motherhood and social responsibilities […]. Our talented women make their ways into all domains through persistence and hard work. They are in schools, universities, hospitals, factories, research centers, everywhere.*

The discourse represented by Rouhani's statements does not fit into the difference ideology, *advanced* by conservative segments of the state with the supreme leader on top, as it entitles women access to all sectors of public space, from schools to factories, in the same way as men. Moreover, it frames family affairs as equal responsibilities of men and women. The center

for women and family affairs under Rouhani's first term created one of its four missions to promote gender balance in men's and women's roles in family, economy, culture, society, and politics as a way to encourage women's access to sources of power in the public arena. Shahindokht Molavardi, the assistant to the president for women and family affairs during Rouhani's first term and in civil rights during his second term, has been forthcoming in rejecting segregation when it burdens women's equal access to public space and all labor markets. One important example is her efforts to remove bans on women's entrance into sport stadiums and direct opposition to the bans. In one of her interviews she commented:

*After all, after some thirty years past our revolution, we must find a way to respond to this demand of a part of our women's population within the ideological frame of our Islamic state, without causing concerns for our religious clerics.*

Molavardi's approach represents a Muslim feminist discourse that seeks to reconcile Islamic values with an ideal(s) of gender equality, although she has not explicitly identified herself as a Muslim feminist. Within this framework, Islam provides a ground for advocating women's equal rights, as it testifies that all human beings are equal in God's eyes regardless of their gender, race, etc. Based on this, women like Molavardi work to undermine conservative trends that view segregation as an Islamic order, and instead highlight Islamic values that entail equality between men and women, including their respective access to the public arena. In a note on Rouhani's government approach to women's public life, Molavardi points out:

*Some people associate gender segregation to Islamic values and laws [...] but the question is, why in the most sacred Islamic place, which is the holiest site, and in the most important Islamic ritual, men and women gather together in a small space (Kaaba) without any purdah or wall separating them, to worship god together? Do we want to surpass Islam and Prophet Mohammad?*

In a more recent interview, as the assistant to the president for citizenship, she prioritizes women's civil right for equal access to urban facilities and spaces, while criticizing the matter of segregation in designing cities. Usually, women taking such defiant positions on issues like

segregation that are tied to revolutionary values in conservatives' views raise resistance on the part of even female conservatives. Molavardi was the target of much criticism. The head of the women's section of Islamic Basij militia, for example, lamented that "instead of being concerned with issues of hejab and modesty, Molavardi is pursuing women's entrance into stadiums." On Molavardi's criticisms of gender inequalities in the labor market, Basij added:

*There is no reason for women to take jobs that require them to interact with a lot of men. Women should take jobs that only deal with women such as teaching and medical professions [in women-only sites].*

Therefore, the issue of gender segregation and the state's approach to it is more complex than what is often assumed. To say that the state as a whole promotes gender segregation is not accurate, as the progressive segments, groups, and individuals attempt to find ways around the segregation discourse through legal pathways and within the Islamic framework. The conservative readings of the different ideologies lead fundamentalist institutions and groups to press segregation as a way to enforce what they understand as Islamic and revolutionary ideals of womanhood. The progressive sectors borrow from the very same Islamic values and revolutionary rhetoric to destabilize the fundamentalist accounts.

Regardless of the political atmosphere though, certain aspects of segregation remain intact because, as previous research has shown, spatial gender segregation provided more opportunities for many women, especially in the religious and working classes, to work, study, and consume (Andrews and Shahrokni 2014; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Shahrokni 2014; Bahramitash 2013; Velayati 2011; Shams 2016). These opportunities cannot and will not be taken back from women. As Shahrokni (2014) argues, gender segregation in today's Iran is legitimized through "a discourse that permeates both the state and society and that justifies gender segregation as a response to [women's needs and rights] and not as a requirement for an Islamic order." Gender-segregation, is so deeply interwoven with the cultural, political, and economic structure of the

country that it cannot be simply removed. As my fieldwork reveals, many women in today's Iran, even among the secular and non-religious, enjoy and support women-only spaces such as green parks, coffee shops, or taxis. In the urban areas and all the risks they create for women's safety, gender-segregation is seen by many women, including my participants, as a solution. While compulsory segregation is not favored by many women as an option it is surely welcomed and supported. This is not specific to Iran; even in contexts where segregation has no institutional basis, it is seen as a way for improving women's safety in urban areas. In the United States, for example, a ride-hailing start-up was launched as a women-only ride-sharing project in which female drivers were exclusively assigned to female riders.

The complex ways that segregation as an institution and discourse are manifested in society and within the state leads to a series of paradoxes, which are the focus of this dissertation. For female drivers of women-only taxis, segregation facilitates their access to an otherwise hyper-masculine job. The mobility that women gain and their ability to perform a masculine job, however, undermines, in their view, the very difference ideology on which segregation is grounded. For female engineers, segregation is a burden to accessing jobs that fit their educational backgrounds. These women rely on their individual capital and undergo severe difficulties to find and hold jobs in male-dominated fields of engineering. These transgressions, however, do not necessarily lead to refuting the difference ideology in ways that might be expected. Many of them borrow from the difference ideology to adjust strategies to open up empowering spaces for themselves in the workplace. These paradoxes are manifestations of what Moallem had theorized in her 2005 book as discords between the ideological imaginations of womanhood in post-revolutionary Iran and women's lives on the ground. The stories of my participants complicate one-dimensional accounts that consider segregation as either strictly

beneficiary or harmful to women by centering their analyses on voices of women who transgress boundaries in male-dominated domains. The views and experiences of these women show that, as the case of the contradictions and complexities in state's approach to segregation, women themselves adopt segregation and difference discourses in paradoxical ways.

Masculine domains of the labor market provide unique sites in which discourses of segregation, difference, and equality become significantly relevant. The narratives of my participants show how women borrow from these discourses in unique and creative ways to deal with the discriminatory environment of work. Women's narratives challenge dichotomous accounts of segregation and difference discourses, depicting them as either empowering or oppressive. My informants addressed the oppressive implications of segregation by discussing accounts of empowerment in which difference, segregation, and equality were not counterparts. They creatively integrated these discourses to empower themselves in the face of challenges within highly male-dominated occupations. At the same time and equally important, these narratives urge us to avoid over-crediting spatial sex segregation for creating opportunities for women's public presence. The goal of this work is to shed light on the unique ways that the combination of segregation, difference, and equality discourse and their inevitable tensions—as Moallem (2005) has theorized—informs women's discourse of empowerment. Through this in-depth ethnographic work among women who make gender atypical occupational choices, this dissertation explores how the historical tensions between the liberal discourse of equality and the Islamic discourse of differences are represented in women's accounts of empowerment and (dis)empowerment within highly male-dominated jobs.

# CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN'S WORK IN IRAN

## Introduction

In this chapter I review the complexities of women's situation, with a particular focus on their work and employment during the years after the revolution. Having established the discursive context in which women's public participation is regulated, this chapter provides a more detailed picture of women's status in the labor market and multi-faceted factors, beyond the state's gender ideology, that have been shaping its trend.

The international labor organization defines "decent work" as containing four key pillars: employment opportunities, rights, protections, and voice. And women's equal access to decent work has and continues to be central to international discourse on the subject of women's empowerment (International labor organization, 2014). The most recent UN women's initiative recognizes women's full participation in the "economic life across all sectors and throughout all levels" as essential for (1) building strong economies; (2) establishing more stable and just societies; (3) creating sustainable development while upholding human rights; (4) improving the quality of life for women, men, families, and communities; (5) and propel businesses' operations and goals (UN Women, 2017).

In 2017, and following the agreement reached among Iran, members of the UN security council and EU, Human Rights Watch released a comprehensive report on women's status in Iran's labor market, highlighting the deficiencies in the country's laws and legislation with regard to creating an inclusive and stable environment for women's economic participation. The report further highlighted the Iranian government's failure to ratify international conventions for enforcing gender equality in the labor market. The report specifies deficiencies in the country's

internal laws, civil code, and legislation to promote women's equal access to work and employment and to prohibit discrimination against them (Human rights watch, 2017).

Based on Article 6 of Iran's labor code all Iranians, regardless of race, gender or ethnicity, are equally protected by labor laws and have the right to choose any profession as long as that choice does not go against Islamic values, the public interest or the rights of others. Article 38 of the labor code prohibits discrimination in pay based on gender, race, ethnicity, and similar characteristics and states that men and women should be paid equally for performing work of equal value under equal conditions (Iran's labor law). Under the section titled "Women's Working Conditions," the labor code prohibits employers from using the female labor force for dangerous, arduous, or harmful work or to allow women to carry, either manually and without mechanical means, loads heavier than the authorized limit (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This section further stipulates employers' duties to provide a total of 90 days paid leave for child-bearing, proper conditions for breastfeeding, and child care centers, under specified conditions.

While the Iranian constitution promises equal political, economic, social and cultural rights to men and women, and labor codes follow a gender-neutral language in stipulating the rights and limitations of workers, privileges given to men in the marriage contract and other legislation, such as passport laws, all translate into presenting serious disadvantages for women in employment. For example, unless added as an addendum to the marriage contract, women cannot assume the right to study and work without a husband's permission following marriage. Married women are not granted a passport or permission to exit the country without their guardians' approval, causing many employers to avoid hiring women for positions with travel-based duties. Furthermore, current laws and regulations do not prevent employers from

discriminating against women in recruitment on the basis of their family conditions or life plans, including pregnancies.

Other institutions engaged in policy design and establishing provisions with regard to women and family can enforce regulations that lead to discrimination against women despite the stipulated equalities in the labor codes and the constitution. For example, in 1992 the Council of the Cultural Revolution put forward a series of policies titled "Employment Policies for Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," to set the tone for the country's overarching approach to women's work. Emphasizing the importance of women's family roles, especially motherhood, in Islamic society, these policies specify the extent to and the economic sectors in which, women's work should be supported. Article 2 of the employment policies states that women's employment is essential to the fulfillment of social justice and the advancement of society. Article 4 emphasizes the importance of creating proper conditions for women in workplaces. Article 5 distinguishes between four types of jobs as regards the suitability for women in (a) jobs for which their presence is desirable based on Islamic codes, such as midwifery, teaching, nursing, and some areas of medicine; (b) those jobs that fit women's assumed physical and mental conditions, such as laboratory sciences, electrical engineering, social work, pharmaceutical sciences, and translation; (c) those jobs that are presumed to be equally suitable for men and women, such as a regular laborer; and (d) those jobs such as judging and firefighting, that are deemed unsuitable for women based on authorities' interpretations of Sharia and on the basis that some work conditions are not appropriate for women. Other articles in the employment policies forbid discrimination against women in professions that are considered suitable for them. However, these articles also clearly set out the ground for enforcement of occupational segregation and the denial of women's access to certain fields. These labor codes and policies

also fail to address discrimination in the hiring process and fail to enforce available nondiscrimination protections in the workplace (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In the next chapter I will delve into the day-to-day struggles facing working women and the shortcomings of policies that could protect them against discrimination.

Despite the deeply rooted discriminatory policies and institutionalized inequalities, Iranian women have always made significant contributions to the country's economy. Women have historically played important roles in production in the various and diversified regions of the country. Iran's agriculture has significantly benefited from women's work in all stages, from planting to harvesting, and its carpet and textile industries would not have survived without women's manual labor. Finally, women's work in the informal economy has been central to economic survival and the overall wellbeing of families, especially the lower-class households (Bahramitash 2013).

Iranian women's economic participation has been impacted by a variety of local and global factors, with the 1979 Islamic revolution as a turning point (Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011). Scholars have mostly discussed these factors under the dichotomy of pre-revolutionary western-modernization versus post-revolutionary Islamic-developmental approaches. Modernization of the industry which started in the late nineteenth century and reached its pick during the Pahlavi's regime in the twentieth century reshaped women's engagement in economy by separating work from home. This separation limited economic participation of the majority of women who lived in rural areas or in culturally traditional and religious families while creating more opportunities for a minority group of upper class, educated, and non-religious women in urban areas. The 1979 revolution, which substituted the secular regime of Pahlavi with an Islamic republic, led to a series of fundamental changes in the country's local political economy

and international relations that made a significant impact on women's economic participation. The Islamic state pursued a different approach to women's public life than the pro-West Pahlavi regime and enacted a series of changes that improved the public mobility of religious women while alienating and limiting the impact of secular groups. A variety of international factors that emerged after the revolution, including the 8-year-long war with Iraq and Western-imposed economic sanctions, also impacted women's work opportunities and economic status. This chapter reviews women's economic status during the years after the revolution. Different time periods after the revolution mark distinct political and economic environments and approaches to women's social lives, including the realm of employment. This chapter covers the important patterns in women's economic participation.

**Post-Revolution and War**

The first decade after the revolution was marked by a major economic recession and increasing poverty. The per capita GDP of the country decreased by 30% between 1978 and 1988 as a consequence of the eight-year-long war with Iraq and U.S.-led economic sanctions (Esfahani and Pesaran 2009). As discussed in the previous chapter, despite women's active participation in the revolution, their social status was not improved in an expected way. The Islamic state's new laws, including veiling and gender segregation, alienated some middle class, professional, and secular women and forced many of them to leave their jobs and even the country. With regard to work and employment, the data reveals a drop in women's share of labor force in the early years following the revolution, from 11.3% in 1976 to 10.6% in 1986 in urban areas, and from 17.6% to 9.8% in rural areas (Statistical Center of Iran). Kian (1997) argues that despite the efforts of Islamist women to call attention to women's social and economic

challenges, especially those of the lower classes and war widows, their issues were marginalized owing to the post-revolutionary crisis.

Considering the immediate and visible impacts of the revolution on women's public lives, especially compulsory veiling, the decline in women's employment buttressed the assumption that women were pushed back to home under the Islamic state. However, scholars have shown that this is a more complex pattern that cannot be understood in isolation from the overall instabilities of the post-revolution era, which weakened the country's economy as a whole and caused the total employment rate to drop from 42.6% to 39% during the same time period (Esfahani and Pesaran, 2009; Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011; Bahramitash 2007). When taking other factors, especially the eight-year-long war and subsequent economic sanctions into account, Islamization rates low in the decline of women's employment during this period.

For example, during the time when many countries in the region, such as Egypt and Tunisia were opening their markets to international investments as a response to the World Bank structural adjustments in the 1980s, Iran was not only fighting a war but was also isolated due to economic sanctions imposed by U.S. These economic sanctions, especially after the war, when the government was determined to open up its markets, attracted international investors, and increased non-oil exports—all of which impeded the globalization of Iran's economy (Olmsted 2011), leading to what some scholars have called a period of de-globalization (Bahramitash and Esfahani 2011, p. 22). While the impact of economic isolation on women's unemployment is difficult to measure, scholars agree that the carpet industry, which hosted a large percentage of women's work, especially in the rural areas, was the hardest hit by sanctions. The market for the handwoven carpet industry began shrinking after the revolution due to the deterioration of political and economic relations with the United States, which has been the main market for

Persian carpets. Between 1978 and 1988, carpet exports declined by 70 percent. Deterioration of the carpet market disproportionately impacted rural and working class women for whom carpet weaving was the main source of income and discouraged many from seeking jobs (Olmsted 2011; Karimi 2011; Velayati 2011).

The eight-year-long war with Iraq was also a key factor in shaping women's economic participation. The war not only unsettled the labor market but also channeled women's available time for managing household needs during the economic hardship of wartime, especially women whose husbands fought the war for the Iranian military. In addition, the increased fertility rate during the decade following the revolution expectedly increased women's responsibilities at home and impacted a pattern of female labor force participation. Moreover, some of the state's policies, such as early retirement offers to government employees (Moghadam 2004) and retirement benefits for rural workers, encouraged many women to leave their jobs.

Despite the decrease in women's share of the labor force, this decade saw an increase in women's public mobility in a unique way. Following the revolution, one of the important mobilizing forces remained economic justice (Bahramitash 2004), and the Islamic Republic placed a great emphasis on addressing poverty and inequalities in health and education by means of increased access to social protections. Khomeini called for a series of social justice programs or jihads to improve literacy, health, and housing in rural areas. These programs relied heavily on the work of volunteers and mobilized a large population of women to join the jihad's cause. Many of the women who joined Khomeini's jihad were from traditional and religious families who were alienated during the Shah's regime. The Shah's projects of Westernization and modernization rendered the public sphere an uneasy arena with which such women could engage, especially in rural areas. For example, veiled women were banned from certain public

places and became disadvantaged in public sector employment. Khomeini's call for women's contribution to a national cause brought groups of women into the public domain who otherwise would have been confined to the private sphere (Paidar 1995; Bahramitash 2014).

When the Shah relied on women's work in his literacy and health corps in rural areas, mostly unveiled women joined his cause; their presence in some rural communities caused resentment. Khomeini's call, on the other hand, was received by masses of not only religious but also, upper middle class, secular women. Many feminists and leftists worked shoulder to shoulder with Islamist women in literacy campaigns and, owing to women's volunteer work, the campaign made a significant improvement in women's literacy rate. The literacy rate among females ages 10 and older rose from 30.9 percent in 1976 to more than 47.6 percent in 1986 (Statistical Center of Iran). The fact that many literacy campaigns were held in mosques, with veiled women as teachers, paved the way for many women of traditional and religious households to participate in these classes without the objection of their families. Veiled women turn out to be much more accepted in rural communities than the unveiled women during the Shah's campaigns. Khomeini's campaigns, in this sense, created an opportunity for different groups of women to work for the cause of women's empowerment.

Enforcement of spatial gender segregation after the revolution also increased women's mobility in public spaces, especially those women who were raised in religious families (Shahrokni 2014), and created more job opportunities for them in some formal sectors such as teaching and nursing (Povey 2005). Owing to gender segregation, some of the jobs became exclusively women's, as men were not allowed into certain spaces such as women's security checkpoints or costumes in airports, all-female dorms, hair salons, and recreation centers. Segregation of public transportation, such as in buses, also improved women's access to the

public arena by creating a safe means for them to commute from home to schools, workplaces, or other public places such as markets, banks, and so on. Therefore while gender segregation limited women's access to certain fields, it improved their public mobility in other ways.

## Post-War and Reconstruction

Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989 started a new era in Iran's political economy. Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed as the new supreme leader and Ayatollah Rafsanjani, a wealthy and influential cleric and a former student of Khomeini, was elected as president. Rafsanjani's policies focused on accelerating economic growth; the eight years under his presidency is referred to as the economic reconstruction period. Despite the centrality of economic justice and equality in revolutionary discourse, Rafsanjani was less interested in promoting economic redistribution through the strengthening of the public sector. He instead pursued policies that empowered the private sector and its entrepreneur class.

The war versus Iraq ended in 1988 and the new government placed an emphasis on social and economic development to pump new blood into a society devastated by nearly a decade of instability under the twin strains of war and revolution. Rafsanjani put a great emphasis on economic recovery through a series of adjustments to open markets and empower the private sector. While during the first decade after the revolution the political discourse of Iran was centered on the idea of social justice and economic equality, during Rafsanjani's presidency the liberal discourse of economic development substituted the discourse of jihads for equality. However, the government lacked the trained personnel necessary for making these fundamental changes in the economy. Moreover, the plunge in oil prices and international economic sanctions, as discussed above, burdened Rafsanjani's plans to revitalize Iran's non-oil economy.

During the first few years of Rafsanajani's term the income of Iranians saw an overall increase. However, this improvement turned out to be short-term due to poorly designed policies and rising international debt (Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2011). The prices of goods began to increase, with adevastating impact on lower-class families, including women. During this period inequality slowly returned to levels seen during the pre-revolutionary era and the poor or "*mostazafin*" who were central to revolutionary discourse and politics became alienated. This raised popular dissatisfaction and a sense of disappointment toward the revolution. To preserve the legacies of the revolution in the face of economic challenges, the government opened up a political space for more progressive Islamist intellectuals and clerics to reconfigure Islamic laws and reinvigorate civil society. This eventually gave birth to the idea of dynamic jurisprudence or "*feghh e pooya*," which opened up new ways for merging Islamic values with demands of the modern globalizing world.

In addition to economic conflicts, women's overall condition posed one of the most puzzling questions to the government: how to manage women's public lives? (Bayat, 2009). A large population of women gained public mobility during the revolution and later in Khomeini's jihad programs (Povey 2001). Rafsanjani's government also continued to rely on women's free labor during its well-known Volunteer Health Worker program, starting 1992, during which women delivered health and family planning education in their neighborhoods and communities. This program turned out to be a large success, particularly as regards population control. The fertility rate dropped to 2.72 in 1997 compared to 6.52 in 1982 (World Bank Statistics). The program specifically targeted low-income communities through face-to-face education. Female volunteers were mostly middle-aged mothers with some education who were invited to join the campaign in different ways. Some members of these communities were reached in the Qur'an

classes held in their neighborhood mosques, some by door-to-door recruiters, and others by fellow volunteers. Nearly 100,000 women in all joined the program. Hoodfar (2010) argues that the implications of the program in women's lives went beyond volunteer work for promoting health; the public mobility they gained through the program caused many to redefine their positions in their families and communities and "reinterpret" or even "reverse" state patriarchy and the more traditional gender ideology.

Women's major contributions to the country through volunteer work gave them a status and a sense of entitlement that could not be reversed. Many conflicts also arose from discriminatory laws enforced by Khomeini immediately after the revolution. For example, under the new family law martyrs' wives had to give up custody of their children to paternal grandfathers or uncles. Also, Islamist, female activists were excluded from key political positions, including the presidency, based on the Arabic term "Rajul" in the new Sharia-based constitution. The term "Rajul" was translated as "men" and used as a pre-condition for taking such positions. Dynamic jurisprudence facilitated a shift in gender policies and led to the emergence of an Islamic discourse for pressing women's rights. The state was compelled to deal with challenges of a global economy, geo-politics, and a trend toward modernity, all tests for which fundamentalist readings of Islam did not suffice. With respect to women, Islamist ideology failed to address their needs, especially in the public arena, while socio-economic and global cultural conditions were increasingly necessitating women's active public engagement (Bayat 2009; Kian 1955).

By the late 1980s the government revived some of the rights given to women under the 1967 family protection laws, despite Khomeni's earlier ban. Women were afforded the right to initiate divorce in cases in which husbands failed to meet their religious duties, such as providing

housing and *nafagheh* (money given by the husband to the wife periodically for life expenses). In addition, women became entitled to half of the wealth accumulated during the marriage, excluding the 'mehr' (money or possessions that the groom is obligated to pay the bride at request) and inheritances in the case of divorce. In 1991 the government passed a law which obliged men to pay wages for women's domestic labor during the marriage in the case of divorce, if the court was convinced that the woman had fulfilled her wifely duties. Women also gained the right to initiate divorce, assume custody of children, and continue education, work, and travel without their husband's permission if this stipulation was included in the marriage contract, with the groom's consent. These progressive elements are among the most significant achievements of women's rights activists in Iran. However, improvements in family rights were not accompanied by significant changes in women's economic participation, although the trend was positive.

Female labor force participation (LFP) began to recover, although at a low rate of 4.4% (Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2011 p. 126). The recovery of the carpet industry during the 1990s helped increase rural women's participation in the labor force, from 7.9% in 1986 to 10.7% in 1996. However, female LFP in urban areas did not see a major change during this period, as the 1980s "baby boomers" dictated that many urban women would have to dedicate increased time to childcare. Women's employment rates began increasing following the general improvement in the country's economy in the first years of Rafsanjani's administration. Their share of the labor force increased from 10.2 percent in 1986 to 13.4 percent in 1999 (Bahramitash 2007). In urban areas, the share of the manufacturing sector as regards women's employment increased from 11.8 percent in 1986 to 19.2 percent in 1996. The share of women's employment in the private sector also began to increase during this period. In rural areas the share of agriculture in

women's employment sharply dropped, while simultaneously rising in the manufacturing sector, especially in the carpet industry, from 33.6 to 51 percent. Overall, women's employment moved away from the agricultural sector toward manufacturing and service during this period and later became more dominated by service sector jobs. The positive trend in women's employment and labor force participation continued during the next two decades, as I will discuss. Higher education was a key factor in improving women's social status, although not to as large an extent as their economic opportunities. As a part of its developmental project, the government removed a gender quota system that restricted women's entrance into certain fields of education (Boozari, 2001), although some of these restrictions were later replaced. Women gained more opportunities for education under Rafsanjani's presidency, as he explicitly encouraged women to pursue higher education. The percentage of female applicants to university admission exams increased from 39 percent in 1988 to 49 percent in 1997 and continued to rise in the following years. While public universities provided free education to everyone, Rafsanjani established a series of private universities as a part of his economic liberalization projects. These private universities created unique opportunities for women's education. The percentage of employed women with higher education increased from 75.8 in 1987 to 82.5 percent in 1999, although their overall employment rate increased slightly, from 8.2 to 9.1 percent (See Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011 for a review).

## Political Reform

This period is marked by the presidency of Khatami, a progressive Islamic scholar and cleric, and an advocate of dynamic jurisprudence. Khatami's policies focused on strengthening civil society in the country and establishing peaceful international relations through his well-

known idea of dialogue among civilizations. Compared to Rafsanaji, Khatami focused less on economic issues and spent more time on social issues, particularly by empowering non-profit and private sectors. Many opportunities became available to different groups, including women, to make their voices heard in civil society.

The women's rights movement after the revolution became most organized, effective, and visible during the reform period (1997-2005) under Khatami's presidency. After eight years of post-war economic reconstruction, the reformist party mobilized women by promising improvement in their political and social status. Women's rights were central to the reformist campaign in 1997, and more than 78 percent of women voted for Khatami. Despite pressure from fundamentalist sectors of the state, such as the guardian council, the parliament at the time, and the office of supreme leader, civil society and women's organizations improved considerably during this period. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and environmental grassroot organizations increased in number, and civil society opened up for women so that they became more publicly visible, with fewer restrictions on clothing codes. During this eight-year period, particularly the first four, women successfully increased their number of publications, organized their level of activism, and established links with global women's movements by participating in international conferences (Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009; Moghissi 2008; Bahramitash 2007; Tahmasebi-Birgani 2010; and Paidar 1995). In 2001 two public universities in Tehran began offering degrees in women and gender studies with courses on gender and development, women's rights, feminism, and gender in Islam; a number of public and private universities in other major cities joined them in later years. The positive trend in women's education also continued, and by 1998 they outnumbered men in universities (Shahrokni and Dokouhaki 2013).

Women's political representation also improved during the reform era. In 1999, many women became elected for local councils. The female delegates of the reformist parliament elected in that year formed "the women's faction" in Majlis and put forth a serious effort to pressing gender equality issues. A number of women-friendly drafts that aimed to improve women's rights and status, such as equal custody rights for divorced women, were passed during this term. The women's faction also successfully passed a bill for Iran to join the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Unfortunately, council of guardians (a conservative institution of fundamentalist clerics) vetoed all of these bills that were passed (Mohammadi 2007; Bahramitash 2011, p. 84).

Female officials helped to attract more attention to women's employment. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs became more sensitized to matters of women's unemployment and their working conditions. A series of efforts were initiated during this period for providing health insurance for housewives and to promote women's entrepreneurship through micro-credit and self-employment programs. Through these efforts, women gained advantages by receiving funds through credit support programs (Bahramitash, 2007; Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011). However, overall the pattern of women's employment and labor force participation did not see a major change during the reform era, compared to the previous period. Women's rate of labor force participation increased at the low rate of 5.8 percent during this period, and their share of urban employment only increased by about 1 percent between 1996 and 2006. Therefore, women's empowerment in civil society did not lead to a proportionate change in their work and employment.

However, it is well documented in the field of women and development (Bahramitash 2005 & 2014) that the official statistics do not always reflect women's actual contributions to the

economy. In Iran, women's work in the informal economy is not captured in available data. For example, a large number of women from different socioeconomic backgrounds work as hairdressers, dressmakers, fashion designers, food processors, taxi drivers, babysitters, maids, private caterers, and tutors. The informal sector typically offers more flexibility than is the case in the formal sector, which is why the informal arena has been a growing part of the economy throughout the world, as many women work informally (Bahramitash 2013). Olmsted (2011) estimates that despite economic isolation and the shrinking of the relative numbers of women working in public sectors, Iranian women's participation in the labor force in their own country has been increasing, as more women are participating in private and informal sectors.
Despite the limitations of data, it is reasonable to argue that women's demand for work increased during this period for several reasons: first, women's average age of marriage increased more than four years between 1966 and 2006 (Bahramitash 2011, p. 92); second, the fertility rate continued to decrease, reaching 1.87 in 2005; third, women's educational attainment continued to rise and in 1998 women outnumbered men in the universities; and fourth and more importantly, rising poverty and high inflation have forced women to seek employment (Bahramitash 2007). Moreover, the opening of civil society during this era and the emergence of a powerful discourse about gender equality relaxed many of the limitations on women's work and public mobility in general.

At any rate, the reform era ended with a bitter sense of disappointment among the public. Some field observations during this period suggests that Khatami's supporters, especially the urban middle class, saw his presidential term as a failure in addressing economic, political, and social issues. Persistent poverty and a lack of political freedom promised by the reformist president translated into a lack of motivation in taking part in the polls and voting in 2005. Many

activists and political analysts in Iran argue that the reform movement should have placed more emphasis on economic development in order to succeed. Dissatisfaction with the reformist government created a political vacuum that Ahmadinejad, a conservative presidential candidate, was able to fill.

## Fundamentalism and Populism

In the 2005 presidential election, Ahmadinejad introduced himself as someone supportive of the poor; his major political campaign slogan was addressing the problem of poverty. One his most well-known claims was to bring oil money to the people`s table; he also promised more economic development in rural and impoverished areas. He wore inexpensive clothing and advocated a simple lifestyle. This ultimately led to his victory versus Rafsanjani in 2005. He continued to articulate a populist agenda during his presidency, particularly in speeches given in many impoverished rural areas.

In 2010 he pushed through a major spending reform despite concerns about its deteriorating impact on already high rates of inflation. The reform involved massive cuts in public subsidies for fuel and various food items. In its place the government introduced a cash transfer program and gas cards. While Ahmadinejad's original intent was to make the cash transfer program targeted to lower class households, the government instead began to enact a cash transfer program for household heads (Salehi-Isfahani 2011).

Ahmadinejad's victory over his reformist rival, Mousavi, turned out to be a shock for a large number of Iranians who were hoping to remove him from office. Ahmadinejad made radical changes in both local and international affairs, which negatively cost the country, both politically and economically. The instabilities caused by the post-election protests, known as the

green movement, and the devastating impact of new rounds of international sanctions against Iran's nuclear program, made Ahmadinejad's second term more challenging. During this period he also lost the full support of the supreme leader.

Ahmadinejad's election overturned many of the positive moves that had been made during the reform era with regard to removing gender discriminations. This particular period was characterized by a "neo-fundamentalist approach" to gender issues (Moghadam and Rezai-Rashti 2011). Conservative ideologies regarding women's social roles gained institutional support by focusing on women's role in the family. For example, the Center for Women's Participation, established under Rafsanjani's presidency, was renamed the Center for Women and Family Affairs. Additionally, many of the women-led NGOs established and promoted during the reform era were practically disabled due to budget cuts, and a new population program for increasing fertility rates substituted the well-known family planning program, which had successfully decreased the population growth rate. In addition, as a response to women's over-representation in universities, a series of restrictions on women's entrance into certain fields was re-introduced. In 2012, women were excluded from 77 fields in 36 universities. According to Shahrokni and Dokouhaki (2013), "The new gender segregation measures [were] primarily aimed at protecting the life chances of men, in education, marriage and the job market."

Women's share of the labor force dropped from 19.96 percent in 2005 to 17.56 percent in 2008 based on the World Bank Statistics. Women's labor force participation decreased from 20.14 percent in 2006 to 15.5 percent in 2011 (Javaheri, 2015). Between 2009 and 2013 — the second term of Ahmadi Nejd's presidency and when the impacts of the economic sanctions on the country's economy reached their pick — the number of employed women decreased by 14.2 percent. In 2013, for every 100 women employed, there were 579 men employed. In the same

year, women constituted 14.7 percent of the employed and 31.1 percent of the unemployed population. The labor force participation of women was reported as low as 12.4 percent, contrasted with 63 percent for men. In the same year, the same category numbered 22.84% for women in Egypt and higher than 25% in Tunisia (The World Bank).

In 2013, 51.6 percent of employed women were in service, with 25 percent in industry and 23.4 percent in agriculture sectors. This distribution changed compared to 2009, when 44 percent were in the service sector, 30.5 percent worked in agriculture, and 25.5 percent labored in industry. The 2013 numbers signal the transformation of women's work from industry and agriculture, to the service sector, as previously mentioned. Interestingly though, between 2009 and 2013 women's share of managerial and decision-making positions improved from 11.8% to 15.2%, despite a decrease in women's share of overall employment. This signals a disjuncture between women's representation in decision-making positions and their opportunities in the labor market. It also signals an intersection of gender and class in determining women's opportunities in the labor market. Despite this overall decrease between 2009 and 2013 women's share of employment improved among those with bachelor or higher degrees.

Therefore, on the whole, opportunities in the already hyper-masculine job market deteriorated for women from 2009 to 2013. In lacking support for women in formal sectors, the informal sector serves as the main resource for women, especially those in lower class households. The lack of data on women's informal employment makes it difficult to develop a reliable statistical picture. However, in informal sectors women enjoy more support from the community and networks among women, which act to more easily reconcile family and work. In her study of lower class women's participation in the informal economy, Bahramitash (2013) shows that community networks, particularly among women, serve as the main support system

for women’s economic empowerment. The informal sector in Iran has created opportunities for lower class women in what she calls a “shadow/ other market,” owing to which women can sell their services and commodities, provide emotional and economic support for one another, direct their families, support the education of their children, and empower themselves not only economically but also socially. In 2011, 94.99 percent of female breadwinners of lower-class households worked in the informal sector as compared to the 1.81 percent in the public-formal category (Javaheri 2015). Furthermore, Moghadam (2011) shows that an increasing proportion of middle/upper class women preferred the “unregulated” and “unorganized” informal labor market. Overall, findings about women’s employment suggest that a combination of local and global factors relegates women’s participation in the formal economy to low levels while making the informal sector more reliable for them to have an income (Olmsted 2011).

On the negative side, informal jobs lack the income stability, benefits, and protections provided in the formal sector, especially the public arena and in the over-representation of women, especially lower-class women, in these sectors, which releases the public realm from its responsibilities for providing welfare. After all, the informal economy emerges due to the downfall of the formal economy and its failure to meet the economic needs of society (Raghfar and Babapour 2015). During the second term of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the country’s economy shrank under the impacts of economic sanctions, and there seemed to be a sense of hopelessness among the public regarding the job market. Evidence from other developing countries during economic crisis show that women are exposed to a disproportionate risk of losing education, jobs, and healthcare during the crisis (Aslanbeigui & Summerfield, 2001). Women also bore the double burden of establishing social safety nets for protecting their families and communities (Bahramitash et al., 2018). While women’s share of labor force dropped, as

previously discussed, fieldwork observations demonstrate that women of different socio-economic and religious backgrounds remained the pillars of social economy, playing an important role in the reduction of poverty during the economic crisis (Bahramitash 2014).

## Political Moderation

In 2013 Iran's political economy saw another round of changes, which coincided with the end of Ahmadinejad's term and the election as president of Seyed Hassan Rouhani, a politically moderate cleric. Rouhani did not identify with either reformist or fundamentalist parties and introduced himself as an agent of hope to put conflicting political groups and institutions into the conversation by following a politically moderate agenda. He made promises to open social space for more freedom and a stronger sense of citizenship. In particular he emphasized his belief in gender equity and women's empowerment in his campaign, which mobilized a large population of women to support him. Only three women were included in Rouhani's first- and second-term cabinets, none of them as ministers. However, the first female ambassador was assigned during Rouhani's first term, and women's representation in county, district, city and village consuls increased (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The current parliament, elected in 2016, has the highest percentage of female representatives since the revolution took place, although this percentage has been as low as 5.8% of the total number of representatives.

While there has not been any major change in women's status, including work and employment, the hope for fulfillment of women's demands and their motivation for activism has increased. Shahindokht Molavardi, vice president for women's and family affairs, promoted a discourse centered on equality and women's rights and pressed gender mainstreaming in policy-making, particularly in the most recent five-year national developmental plan. While the

language of this sixth developmental plan remains gender neutral and women's issues are occasionally brought up under initiatives for improving the institution of family, there have been some improvements compared to previous plans. For example, the plan has stipulated that women's human capital and the importance of gender justice in sustainable development must be recognized by the executive branch. The plan also requires the Center for Women and Family Affairs to design indexes for measuring progress in different sectors with respect to improving women's overall status. The Center is also required to monitor such progress and report annually to the parliament and the cabinet. With regard to women's economic participation, however, the plan remains limited to emphasizing the necessity of creating jobs for female breadwinners and the advancement of home-based jobs. The final report of the Center for Women and Family Affairs, published before the 2017 election, also is devoid of any information on progress toward improving women's participation and status in the formal economy.

The country's economy has been recovering slowly but surely during this period. The GDP growth rate rose from -.2% in 2013 to 13.4% in 2016 and the inflation rate sharply decreased, from 34.73% to 9.04% in the same period. The unemployment rate, however, rose from 10.4% in 2013 to 12.45% in 2016, with a widening gender gap (The statistical center of Iran). The International economic sanctions were removed in 2015 after the well-known Iran deal—the nuclear agreement between Iran and the UN Security Council's P5+1 members. The impact of these improvements in the country's economy and women's work and employment are yet to be explored. However, the overall picture of women's underrepresentation in the formal economy and discrimination in women's access to work, as discussed in previous sections, has not changed significantly. Since the fieldwork was conducted in 2015, in this section I present

some more recent statistics, released by Iran's statistical center, to put the qualitative arguments of the next chapter into perspective.

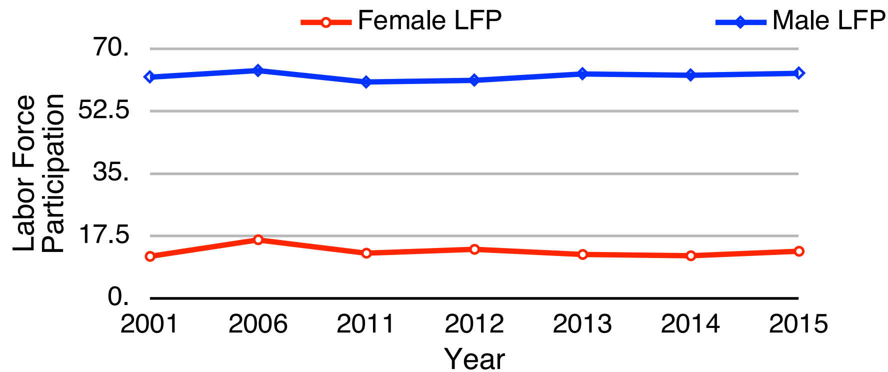
In 2015 the overall population of the country was reported as more than 78 million, with more than 57 million living in urban areas. In the same year, the province of Isfahan had the urban population of more than 4 million, with nearly 49% female. Tehran, the most populous province, had an urban population of nearly 12 million, with nearly 50% women. Table 1 shows the overall labor force participation and the unemployment rate between 2006 and 2015. The labor force participation during the past one and a half decades remains at or below 40%. To put this in perspective, in 2015 labor force participation in the United States was nearly 62.12%, nearly 64.53% in Sweden, and 50.27% in Japan. In the MENA region, Iran has one of the lowest labor force participation rates, compared to 80% in UAE, more than 69% in Kuwait and Bahrain, and 49.44% in Egypt.

When adding gender to the equation, women's participation fares are significantly lower than those of men. Graph 1 compares male and female labor force participation between 2001 and 2015. As we see, over the years women's rate of participation remains considerably lower than that of men; this shows women's disproportionate role in keeping the overall LFP at lower levels. The reasons for women's low rate of economic participation are not entirely determined, especially that women's educational achievements have been considerably improving. An oil-based economy, cultural attitudes and gender ideology, and gender basis and discriminations in formal policies and practices are among the most important factors mentioned (Moghadam, 1995; Moghadam & Rezaie-rashti, 2011).

Table 1: Overall labor force participation and the unemployment rate for the Iranian population, of ages 10 or older, 2006-2015. The Statistical Center of Iran

| Year | Labor Force Participation | Unemployment Rate |
|---|---|---|
| 2006 | 40.4 | 11.3 |
| 2011 | 36.9 | 12.3 |
| 2012 | 37.4 | 12.1 |
| 2013 | 37.6 | 10.4 |
| 2014 | 37.2 | 10.6 |
| 2015 | 38.2 | 11 |

Graph 1: Female and Male Labor Force Participation (Statistical Center of Iran)




In 2015, 87.2% of urban women, age 10 or above, were not participating in the labor market. Out of those, 18.4% were students and 63.9% home-makers. In the same year, more than 20 million women, as compared to some 200,000 men, reported family responsibilities as the reason for not seeking jobs. Table 2 compares women's labor force participation in Iran and some other MENA countries, in addition to Turkey, in 2015. While labor force participation is relatively low in all

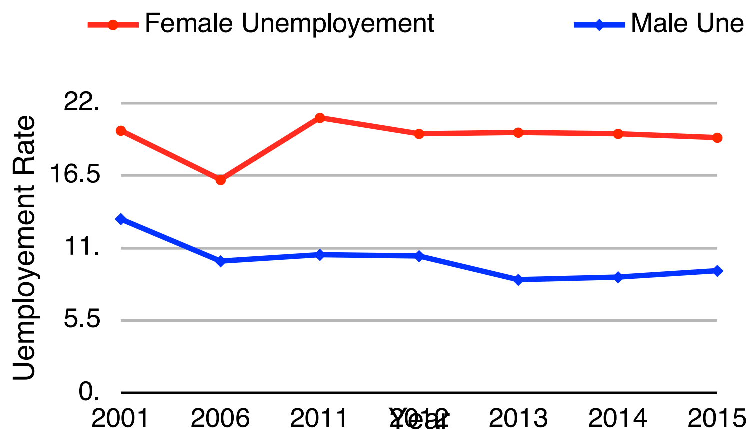
the countries, the rates in Iran are lower than most other countries in the region with comparable economic structures (Moghadam, 2013).

Table 2: FLFP in MENA in 2015: A Comparison (The World Bank)

| Turkey | 30.35 |
|---|---|
| Morocco | 25.33 |
| Tunisia | 25.08 |
| Egypt | 22.76 |
| Iran | 16.17 |
| Jordan | 14.24 |
| Syria | 12.17 |

As my fieldwork for this research revealed, those women who stepped into the labor market and found jobs that fit their educational backgrounds, skills, and needs faced many difficulties in advancing their careers, factors that will be discussed in the next chapter. The next graph, which compares unemployment rate between men and women, clearly outlines a discriminatory labor market.

Graph 2: Female and Male Unemployment (Statistical Center of Iran)



As we see, the gender gap in unemployment has remained high in recent years as well. While during Rouhani's term we observe a slight increase in men's rate of unemployment and a decrease in women's unemployment, the gender gap is still significantly wide. This is true despite Rouhani's heavy reliance on female constituencies during both of his campaigns and the increased hope among women for an improvement in their overall condition.

Table 3: Employment Across Economic Sectors (Statistical Center of Iran)

| Year | Women | | | Men | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Agr | Ind | Sr | Agr | Ind | Sr |
| 2001 (1380) | 31.2 | 31.8 | 37 | 25.2 | 30.4 | 44.4 |
| 2006 (1385) | 30.9 | 31.7 | 37.3 | 21.3 | 31.7 | 47 |
| 2011 (1390) | 26.3 | 23.3 | 50.4 | 17.2 | 35.2 | 47.6 |
| 2015 (1394) | 22.8 | 23.8 | 53.4 | 17.1 | 34.2 | 48.7 |

Table 3 splits men's and women's employment into different sectors in the years from 2001 to 2015. While in 2001 the industrial sector provided more than one-third of women's employment, these jobs have been substituted with service sector jobs over the course of years. Opportunities for men in the industrial section, however, have increased during the same period. Women's employment, therefore, is leaning more toward the service sector, which in 2015 hosted more than half of employed women. While evidence from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean show that export-oriented industries heavily rely on women as a cheap, flexible labor force (Park, 1995; Ngai, 2007; Bosse & Acosta-Belén, 1995), in Iran, and other industrializing countries in the region, industry has not absorbed female labor force to the same extent (Moghadam, 2003). This may signal, as witnessed in the masculine culture of industrial jobs,

gender discrimination in the employment process, as well as the trend toward the increasing attractiveness of service sector jobs to women.

In addition to health and education, which have been persistently female-dominated, new opportunities in sales, administration, hospitality, retail work, restaurants, and so on, in the modernizing sectors of the economy have been attracting more women. Although the overall pattern of women's employment does not show any significant improvement despite new service sector opportunities, the service sector has not yet been feminized, as opposed to what was seen in the global north during the 1970s (Haghighat-Sordelini, 2009). It appears that these types of jobs are dominating women's work in the formal sector. Overall, while manufacturing jobs detract from women's overall employment, the service sector is not vibrant enough to attract them and compensate for the shortage of opportunities in industry and agriculture (Moghadam, 2003). It should yet be noted that women's participation in the informal service economy as, for example, hair dressers, caterers, bakers, personal trainers, or masseuses (See Bahramitash, 2014) is not fully captured by available statistics (Langsten & Salem, 2008; Donahoe, 1999). A recent report by the Center for Women and Family Affairs estimates that some 50% of the jobs held by women are in the informal sector (Human watch report, 2017).

Tables 4 and 5 show more specific information on economic participation in the urban areas of Isfahan and Tehran, where fieldwork was conducted in 2015. Women in urban Isfahan have a higher rate of labor force participation than in Tehran, but fewer opportunities for employment. In addition, a larger proportion of working women are attracted to the service sector in Tehran than in Isfahan. This may signal to a more vigorous service sector in Tehran, where there are more job opportunities for women.

Table 4: Women's Labor Force Participation and Unemployment in Isfahan and Tehran (Statistical Center of Iran)

| | Women's Labor Force Participation | Women's Unemployment Rate |
|---|---|---|
| Urban Isfahan | 16.2 | 27.9 |
| Urban Tehran | 12.2 | 17 |

Table 5: Women's Employment Across Different Economic Sectors in Isfahan and Tehran (Statistical Center of Iran)

| | Share of agriculture in women's employment | Share of industry in women's employement | Share of service sector in women's employment | Share of public sector in women's employement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Urban Isfahan | 1.7 | 38.3 | 60 | 30.8 |
| Urban Tehran | 0 | 20.5 | 79.5 | 37.1 |

The differences between Isfahan and Tehran in terms of female labor force participation is also noteworthy. Tehran offers a more flexible cultural atmosphere for women's public livelihoods than many other cities, including Esfahan, which is stereotypically known as a traditional and religious city. This is not to argue that in Isfahan one cannot easily observe women's public participation, behind the surface, in shopping malls, banks, restaurants, green parks, etc. However, owing to its larger and more diverse population, Tehran is known to offer a more tolerant and vibrant public environment to different groups of women, especially the non-religious, secular, and young. Pardis Mahdavi's work (2009), for example, provides deep ethnographic evidence that shows how the new generation of youth in Tehran push the boundaries of sexual activities in unique ways, and perhaps, beyond imagination.

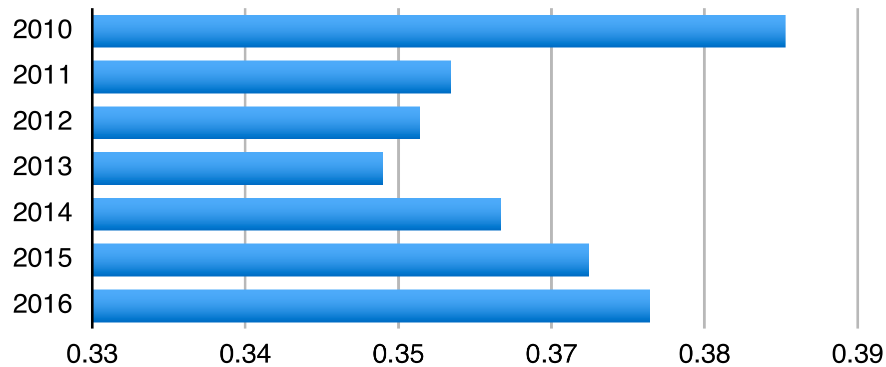
It is therefore unsettling to make stereotypical assumptions that see a higher rate of labor force participation among women in urban Isfahan than in Tehran. The higher FLP in Isfahan can signal that there are more severe economic conditions facing families in Isfahan, ones that enforce women to increase their participation in the labor force. Based on a study on household expenditures and budgets undertaken by the central Bank of Iran, in 2015 the average household budget in Tehran was significantly higher than in other regions. This difference has been lessening during the course of past decade, as shown in Table 6. Taking household spending into consideration, inequality between households in Tehran and other regions remains significant.

Table 6: Average Household Budget in Tehran and Other Provinces (million toman) (Central Bank of Iran)

| | Tehran | Other Provinces |
|---|---|---|
| 2016 | 4.84 | 3.3 |
| 2006 | 5.2 | 2.77 |

The Gini Index can also provide some insights into the overall amount of inequalities in the country. Despite a sharp decline in the Gini index from 2010 to 2011, the index has been rising from 2013 onward, signaling an increasing level of inequality throughout the entire country during Rouhani's term. The cash transfer program during the administration of Ahmadi Nejad and his emphasis on social programs decreased economic inequalities during his term. For example, my taxi-driver participants, who predominantly belong to lower-class households, were more satisfied with Ahmadi Nejad because of the gas cards given to taxi drivers during his

Graph 3: Gini Index: 2010-2016 (Iran's Central Bank)




the fieldwork that was done, different cities such as Isfahan, Arak, and Tabriz witnessed protests and strikes among factory workers for delayed pay and unfulfilled benefits.

The combination of statistical information from Rouhani's presidency thus far indicates that the average living conditions of Iranian families have continued to deteriorate, while employment opportunities have not increased. While the government was successful in controlling inflation, the prices of commodities, food, and housing have continued to rise. To people's disappointment, the removal of some international sanctions did not deliver immediate, visible improvements in day-to-day life. The last days of 2017 witnessed the surprising expansion of popular unrest as people protested economic pressures. As research in different regions of the world shows, women are particularly vulnerable during times of economic recession, as their needs and rights are de-prioritized at different levels. While taking roles in shaping and expanding safety nets to protect their families and communities, women's education, health, and employment were at more risk than those of men during the crisis (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield, 2001; Al-Ali, 2005 & 2007; Park, 2011; Amott, 1993; Moghadam 2011; Nikolic-Ristanovic, 1994). The taxi drivers in my study were grasping an opportunity—alongside male taxi drivers—to gain more money for their families during a difficult time of economic

instabilities. Under tight economic conditions and in a labor market that is not promising to women, especially to low-skilled and low-educated ones, these women bravely struggled with the challenges of arduous, culturally masculine, and socially unsettling job to survive difficult times. Chapter 5 delves into the narratives of these women and their ability to address the challenges of destabilizing the norms of a male-dominated labor market and segregated public spaces in the role of female taxi driver. Before moving on to this chapter, however, Chapter 4 takes a closer look at the nuances of day-to-day discrimination against women in the workplace.

# CHAPTER 4: OPPRESSION BEYOND STATE'S PATRIARCHY

## Introduction

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, labor codes and employment laws forbid discrimination against women in the workplace. Iran has also ratified 14 conventions of the International Labor Organization (five out of eight ILO fundamental conventions), including the equal remuneration convention, and the discrimination convention concerning employment and occupation. Iran has been a party to the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) since 1976; it is an agreement that requires signees to "ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights." (ICESCR, article 6). Article 7 of ICESCR enforces "fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work." However, as specified by the Human Rights Watch Report, these nondiscrimination laws have not been enforced in different workplaces and women are not protected from severe inequality (Human rights watch, 2017). Based on the same report, jobs are heavily sex-typed on the employers' end, and women have not been given the chance to apply for many positions.

In 2008, I was one of the 13 female graduates, out of a cohort of 130, from the Department of Mechanical Engineering at one of the prestigious universities in Isfahan. Immediately after graduation, I found a job in the engineering department of a small family-owned factory. I clearly remember my first job interview, when my manager looked me in the eyes and asked: "do you think you can work in the manufacturing salon among all the male employees?" I responded, with no doubt in my mind, "It does not make a difference for me to

work with men or women." After 11 years now, I cannot forget his confident face when saying, "I cannot let you be a sheep amongst wolves; I should prepare you." He told me, directly, in our first encounter that I would have to "man up" and be ready to deal with the "unavoidable" difficulties of a masculine profession. At that very moment, he placed the responsibility on me to deal with an environment which he knew was not going to be very friendly toward a young, recent graduate and female engineer.

It did not take me a long time to learn my lesson. The excitement of stepping into the world of work soon gave its place to anxieties of dealing with the day-to-day struggles of fitting myself into a resistant atmosphere, with almost no institutional resources to rely on. My manager's support in fact continued in the form of individual meetings to advise me on how to deal with male laborers, technicians, and engineers, and adjusting my performance in order to survive in the workplace. At the end of the first month though, I received a delayed paycheck below the minimum monthly wage set out by the Ministry of Work, which as I learned later, was given to male laborers and female workers who had family expenses. A whole set of challenges that I intend to discuss in this chapter, by drawing on the experiences of other women, convinced me that I was not the right fit for the job and did not have what it took to fight this battle.

In the previous chapter I established that the Iranian labor market is overwhelmingly male, and women's employment is mostly de-prioritized within the overarching policymaking structure. I also noted that occupational and spatial segregation have worked hand in hand to maintain a gender imbalance in the labor market. This chapter attempts to unpack the day-to-day conditions facing women by drawing on interview data with on-site engineers and drivers of women-only taxis. Because of the gender-atypical nature of their jobs, these women are exposed to the challenges of segregation both in the labor market and in public spaces, in perhaps the

most severe ways compared to many other women. The current literature on women's work in the Middle East, particularly Iran, is mostly focused on their low rates of participation (Soltani, 2017; Haghighat-Sordellini, 2009). Not many studies, however, provide an on-the-ground picture of what women think about work environments and the nuances of their day-to-day struggles. In this chapter I first review the previous literature on studies of women in work, to provide an overview of the different elements and mechanisms that sustain the gendered structures of work according. I will then offer a criticism of the disjuncture between the literature of labor force participation among Middle Eastern women and the broader literature of women and work, mostly gleaned from a Western context. Finally, I will discuss the experiences of my participants to explore what, in their view and experiences, discourage women from pursuing jobs that fit their interests, background, and needs. I will present their day-to-day struggles in dealing with their hyper-masculine working environments in which patriarchal ideas of gender differences and hegemonic constructions of masculinity (Connell, 1995) are heavily prevalent.

While the literature on women's struggles in sex-atypical jobs and masculine domains in Western countries dates back to the 1970s (Perrucci, 1970; Shafer, 1974), the voices of women in the developing context, particularly in the Middle East, and in similar conditions, is underrepresented in the current literature. Women's labor force participation and employment in the Middle East, including Iran, have been Primarily discussed under broader topics of economic development (Revenga & Shetty 2012; Olmsted 2013), poverty alleviation (Bahramitash 2013 & 2014), women's empowerment under Islamic culture and political economy, and women's agency (Ghasemi 2013; Hoodfar 1997; Hoodfar 2010; Povey 2015; Charrad 2011, p. 427; Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam 2011). While these studies are important, and crucial to resolving some of the issues facing women, they draw attention away from the quality of women's experiences at

work, as has been and continues to be documented for women in the Western context (Tlaiss, 2015). In this sense, my interview data with nearly 70 women in the masculine sectors of the Iranian labor market constitute a unique resource with which to fill in this gap in the literature. The voices of these women show the failure of the Islamic state to deliver its promises of safety and dignity to women in the public arena, as discussed in the second chapter. My findings in this chapter shed light on the different pathways through which the masculinization of work environments occurs, based on women's perceptions. But more importantly, this in-depth depiction of the nuances of  women's day-to-day struggles sheds light on the greatness and power of those women who manage to work, earn money for their families, and maintain their livelihoods under such discriminatory conditions.

## Women and Work

The world of work has not been a friendly and easily accessible arena for women. There is a plethora of research, with a range of methodologies and in various social contexts that has documented the inequalities between men and women in the workplace. Since the 1970s feminist critiques of work called for attention to inequalities facing women at work. Scholars and activists such as Smith (1988), Ferguson (1984), Acker (1990), England (1982) and many others used the feminist perspective to problematize the patriarchy embedded in organizational structures, over-representation of men in positions of power, and the systematic burdens to women's access to equal status. Acker (1990) suggested that work organizations are gendered in a sense that "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between men and women, masculine and feminine." However, many working environments continue to be resistant to women's

presence and the fulfillment of equal working conditions for them up to the present. Burdens to women's advancement range from explicit forms of discriminations, such as misogynic stereotyping (Rosen, 1970; Latue et al., 2011; Hipple et al., 2015; Diamond, 2005), to more implicit inequalities rooted in gendered structures of work (Bird, 2011; Ridgeway and Correl, 2004; Wilson et al., 2009; Sattari and Sandefur, forthcoming; Goetz, 1997).

Sex segregation has been and continues to be a major explanation for the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace (England et al., 1988; Moorhouse, 2017; Charles and Bradley, 2002). Various studies have examined the reasons why men and women end up in different sectors of the labor market. This is of interest to scholars because male-dominated occupations tend to be higher in status, income, and benefits compared to female-dominated jobs (Reskin, 1993; Cotter et al., 1997; Levanon et al., 2009; Duncan and Hoffman, 1979; Cech, 2013). Scholars have suggested multiple explanations of why segregation happens and how it is maintained. One group of these studies focuses on the supply-side of work, examining why women make different career choices than men. Neo-classical economics, for example, focus on women's rational occupational choices, considering their family responsibilities, especially child bearing and rearing (Mincer and Polachek, 1974). According to these approaches, women tend to choose jobs that best fit into their family obligations, and consequently often show interrupted work histories due to episodes of child bearing and rearing. Based on this framework, women are more prone to jobs that offer higher starting salaries and are penalized less for intermittency (England, 1974); these types of jobs are more easily found in female-dominated fields such as health and education. Human capital models attribute women's over-representation in specific jobs to their educational and skill levels, arguing that female dominated jobs tend to require fewer skills and lower levels of specialties (Reskin, 1993; Olson, 2013). Finally, gender-role

socialization approaches argue that women internalize traditional gender roles and gender-typical occupational interests through processes of socialization at different life stages and through various mechanisms (Marini, 1989). More recent scholarship on gender and occupational choices built upon this third approach by speculating that an entire set of institutional and structural settings enforce gendered self-expression in careers and act to encourage men and women to tend toward sex-typical occupations (Cech, 2013).

The second group of studies go beyond individual career choices and focus on structural characteristics of labor markets and workplaces that enforce segregation. These demand-side studies cover a broad spectrum of analysis, ranging from national practices to individual biases. Moorhouse (2017), for example, uses a cross-national comparative analysis to show how, in addition to the rate of unemployment at national level, governmental policies that protect women's economic rights result in different countries demonstrating varying levels of sex segregation in education and the labor market. She shows that offering policies supportive to women, plus the relative strength of labor markets in providing jobs for the entire population, help to reduce sex segregation. A large body of studies have explored how different organizational designs, workplace features, and recruitment styles facilitate or burden women's transition into male-dominated sectors (Kmec, 2005; Reskin, 1993; Reskin and Bielby, 2005; Diamond, 2005). There is also extended research on the impact of employers' biases and the resulting unequal treatment of women when they apply for work in traditionally male sectors (Glick, 1991; Glick et al., 1987; Heilman, 1995).

Regardless of what causes men and women to end up in different types of occupations, many scholars find it more important to explore the experiences of those women who work. One of the areas that has long attracted the attention of researchers centers on women's double

burdens of balancing work and family Aisenbrey and Fasang, 2017; Geier, 2017; Young and Schieman, 2018; Grönlund and Öun, 2018; Levy, 2015; Williams, 2000). Arlie Hochschild (1989) used the term “second shift,” referring to unpaid domestic labor that working women are disproportionately in charge of following their paid work. Hochschild documents how women’s disproportionate role in childcare and household responsibilities cause work-life conflicts, tensions, and stress. Other studies have documented how women’s health and well-being are impacted by the double burdens of work and family (Väänänen et al., 2004), and how the quality of their work experiences, job satisfaction, and career decisions are impacted by domestic work (Buddhapria, 2009; Fox, 2005; Probert, 2005; Rosser, 2004). Data from industrially advanced countries show that while the number of hours men spend on household responsibilities has increased, women still spend considerably more time on household labor [R]. A plethora of studies in various social contexts document how traditional expectations from women cause many to leave their jobs or trade off promotions (Bespinar, 2010; Buddhapria, 2009; Younger et al., 2015; Papps, 1992; Tlaiss, 2015; Crompton and Lyonette, 2011). In the United States, Belkin (2003), used the term “opt-out revolution” to refer to a trend among college-educated, married, professional women of choosing to leave their jobs and becoming full-time mothers. Lovejoy and Stone (2012), show that these “opted-out” women do not return to their original careers, even if they decide to resume working. Instead, they seek new opportunities in care-oriented professions which offer more flexibility but lower income and status.

In addition to work-family conflicts, women face other issues at work, particularly when they enter male-dominated professions. Female professionals are more likely to express dissatisfaction with respect to institutional culture and opportunities for advancement and leadership than is the case with men (Buddhapria, 2009 &2011; Xu, 2008). They also experience

more unfriendly and hostile interactions with their colleagues and more often feel isolated, compared to men (Tyson and Borman, 2010; Kantola, 2008; Buddhapria, 2011). Tokenism and hyper-visibility are other challenged facing women, factors which increase attention to their routine performances and therefore expose them to more stress (McKendall, 2006). Female professionals in masculine fields also feel more exclusion from formal and informal institutional networks and events than do their male counterparts (Kantola, 2008; Buddhapria, 2011; Prokos and Padavic, 2002; Yoder and Berendsen, 2001). Exclusion from informal networks in male-dominated workplaces can be consequential, as these relationships entail opportunities such as conversations about work, involvement in institutional decision-making, mentoring and collaborative relationships, all of which women are more likely to miss due to their marginalization (Heilman, 1994).

Female professionals in male-dominated fields are also disadvantaged when it comes to building mentorship relationships with supervisors and finding role models to look up to (Buddhapria, 2009; Neumark and Gardecki, 1998). Having proper mentorship and role models are essential to professional progress, as both factors tend to enhance general knowledge, skills, networks, and relationships, and eventually increase competency for advancement and upward mobility (Bruke and Mckeen, 1996; Ragins, 1989). Mentoring relationships in many cases reinforce or reproduce the uneven distribution of power, value, and credit in the workplace. In contexts in which stereotypes and gendered assumptions about women, such as less competitiveness and technical expertise are held by individuals, male mentors might establish less productive and meaningful relationships with their female mentees than is the case among males (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Mentoring relationships between male mentors and female mentees in many cases are shaped based on a traditional gender ideology that assumes women

prioritize family over work. For example, Dunham et al. (2012) have found that male mentors more often emphasize prioritizing family to career when they work with female junior faculty in STEM fields. Doerfiller and Kammer (1986) showed that women become the target of negative stereotypes when they demonstrate patterns of workaholism (i.e. devotion to work over family). Studies also show differences between men and women in the ways they benefit from mentorship relationships (Bruke and Mckeen, 1996).

## Women's Work in the Middle East and the Notion of Patriarchy

*M*ost of the research in the area of women's participation in masculine jobs is based in a Western context (See Natarjan, 2006; Prenzler and Sinclair, 2013 as examples of exceptions). With the urge coming from tenets of post-colonial and black feminism for recognizing the contextual specifies of women's experiences (Patil, 2013; Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 1988), it is very problematic that the work of Middle Eastern women in masculine domains is overshadowed within the academic literature. While it is well established that patriarchy constitutes the main burden on women's economic participation in general (Soltani, 2017; Goetz, 1997), there is a shortage of theoretical frameworks for understanding the complex ways in which "patriarchy" is manifested in the day-to-day lives of women in the workplace. Integrating the broader studies of women in work into the current research on women's work and public participation in the Middle East helps us unpack the different ways that women understand and respond to incidences of patriarchy. We need to realize that patriarchy is not a homogenous institution, as problematically conceptualized within the liberal feminist and gender and development literature (Kandiyoti, 1988; Feldman, 2001). Patriarchy is intertwined with different social institutions, from family to religion, to education, and to work, and women's reactions to its manifestations

must be examined by taking into account the characteristics of those institutions, in addition to the social, economic, religious, cultural, and historical specifics of any context (Patil, 2013). Considering the large amount of research done in the Western context on the nuances of women's experiences at work, and the multi-faceted nature of their disadvantages, it is unfortunate that the dominant perceptions of Islamic patriarchy in the Middle Eastern context overshadow the need for a deeper understanding of the various mechanisms of gender inequality in the workplace. An examination of women's experiences in masculine jobs in the context of the Middle East in general and Iran in particular sheds light on the ways that the institutionalization of hegemonic masculinity, segregation, inefficient legislation, and economic burdens, as discussed in the previous chapters, intersect in shaping and sustaining systems of discrimination toward and marginalization of women. To homogenize all of these complex mechanisms of suppression and exclusion under the term "patriarchy" deprives us of analytical opportunities to understand how inequalities are sustained and, more importantly, what needs to be addressed for facilitating women's empowerment in the labor market. Situating Iranian women's experiences in the broader literature of women at work also prevents us from characterizing Middle Eastern women as silent victims of patriarchy.

Furthermore, any account of patriarchy that overlooks women's active negotiations with patriarchy's contours of oppression is reductionist. As Feldman (2001) suggests, patriarchal relationships must be understood as "mediated processes of negotiation constituted by complex identities and practices rather than by an assumed universalized, unitary, dominating force of male power and authority and female subordination." Re-structuring of patriarchal relationships does not necessarily happen through top-down adjustments, such as the developmental economic, political, or cultural interventions. Patriarchal relationships are re-structured through

the day-to-day practices of women in dealing with incidences of inequality and oppression (Kandiyoti, 1988; Gatwiri and Mumbi, 2016). From this perspective, delving into the ways in which women engage with incidences of patriarchy, as well as how they interpret and respond to them, becomes crucial to any theoretical approach for understanding how patriarchy operates to maintain burdens on women's participation in the male-dominated labor market. This chapter contributes to filling this gap by asking how Iranian women in the masculine jobs of on-site engineering and taxi driving perceive the masculine constructions of their jobs, and what, in their view, disempowers women within the formal labor market in Iran.

In my data analysis I avoid placing women's narratives of their struggles into the box of women's victimization at the hands of the patriarchal structures of the Islamic state. Instead, following what the literature on women in work suggests, I view these jobs as unique contexts in which women encounter heightened forms of hegemonic masculinity (Rabe-Hemp, 2009), and therefore, provide unique cases for understanding how women interpret the masculine structures of work. Both taxi driving and on-site engineering are masculine in the sense that they are "seen as appropriate for workers with masculine characteristics" (Britton, 2000). The non-traditional and gender atypical nature of these jobs, in addition to their public visibility, evoke an entire set of controversies and discussions surrounding what work counts as suitable for women to do in a public space, as well as what are acceptable forms of exuding femininity. This places these women in a situation about which they can reflect and critically engage with a dominant discourse that produces definitions of masculinity and femininity and the different ways that patriarchal constructions disadvantage women. Therefore, these women are in a unique position to help us understand the nuances and complexities of how masculine constructions of work operate based on women's perceptions. After discussing women's perceptions of masculinity in

this chapter, the next chapter will delve into how female taxi drivers respond to these masculine constructions by performing femininity and their masculine jobs collaboratively (Ainsworth et al., 2014).

## Gendered and Sexualized Work Environments

*On the streets:*

In her well-known theory, Connell conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity as one among multiple forms of masculinities and "the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allows men's dominance over women to continue." (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). There is a rich body of literature that shows how hegemonic masculinity serves as a mechanism against women's empowerment in different institutional contexts (Schrock & Schwalbe; Lampropoulou and Archacis, 2015; Irvine and Vermilya, 2010; Hearn, 2012; Armato, 2013). These studies show how embeddedness of hegemonic masculinity into interactional practices and institutional logics can explain the subordination of women within different settings.

Organizations, as Acker (1990) argued, are gendered in the same way as their workers, and the careers of my participants are decidedly masculine. The narratives of these women revealed how hegemonic constructions of masculinity are central to the substance and quality of their day-to-day experiences, and how the culture and logic of their job experience is grounded in hegemonic masculinity.

Masculinity was reified in different forms in women's experiences. Violence and sexual harassment are among the most pronounced manifestations of hegemonic masculinity, and in many contexts they are integral to the constructions of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity

(Robinson, 2005; Lee, 1998; Anwary, 2015; Michalski, 2017; Clason, 2008). For women in my study, the incidences of harassment advanced by men or the possibility of being harassed constituted a central part of how they understood their jobs. Both taxi drivers and engineers were struggling with daily occurrences of verbal or physical sexual harassment, minus even a minimum of institutional support for protecting themselves against such outrages.

For these female taxi drivers, sexual harassment was an integral part of working on the streets. While they felt protected within the segregated spaces of their taxis, the unavoidable exposure to male passersby or taxi drivers on the streets appeared to be intertwined with numerous unsettling experiences. For example, Ziba was a young, motivated taxi driver who was working to help her husband who, in her view, was suffering from drug addiction, which caused her to seek work to provide for their family. She shared one of her experiences:

*I have been in this job for one and half year now but thanks god I really like it and am not tired of it yet. I am almost happy with the income too [...] But sometimes somethings happen that you get disgusted with yourself. For example, two weeks ago, my back was aching badly, and I had to stretch outside the car. I was leaning against my co-worker's taxi and talking to her. Another car stopped right behind my friend's taxi for a couple of minutes, but we ignored him and kept chatting. Then he moved forward, hit the brake in front of me, and rolled down his window to ask me an address. I was giving him directions, but he was doing awkward things with his hands. I looked inside his car and saw he was nude below the waist...My head started aching and I just walked away [...] That day I was so disgusted with myself! So disgusted! I kept asking myself: why did I choose such a job that makes me be out on the streets and witness these things?*

In this account, Ziba questions her own decision to become a taxi driver rather than the behavior of her perpetrator. This shows that she perceived such incidences as inherent in the nature of navigating public space as a woman, a view which signals to the embeddedness of masculinity into how this job was constructed. Other drivers frequently expressed frustration with the abusive behaviors and languages that they were exposed to during the day. Badri, one of the drivers in Tehran, recounted:

*Just the other day [as I was waiting for riders on a street side], a random guy shouted dirty words at me and I got really really sad. Shortly after that, a male taxi driver cut in front of me and blocked my way. He was HUGE and old and was saying really dirty things to me! I was shaking and crying! The only thing I could do was to call my friend and ask her to send her husband over. Although the guy left before he arrives.*

Some women such as Saboor from Isfahan reported exposure to more extreme forms of violence:

*[it was a heavy traffic] the car in front of me suddenly stopped and I had to slam on brake. The bus behind me started flashing his lights [signaling to me to stop]; [after we passed the traffic] we both stopped. My son and sister were in the car with me. He got off his bus and said to me: 'I do not know what kind of a fool has gave you a driver's license!' I calmly responded: 'the same fool who has gave you one!' I don't know what happened that he grabbed my son who was sitting in the front, by neck! I quickly unbuckled and got off the car! I was shorter than him and he was huge! I slapped him in face and grabbed his collar! [laughing] My sister was so shocked! she asked anxiously if I always do such things wile I am out on streets! I swore to god that it was only because the man attacked my son! But I said nothing to my older son or brother because they would think my work is always like this!*

Female drivers also brought up common examples of insulting phrases spoken by male drivers to undermine their driving skills as an integral part of the job. These included phrases such as "go drive the laundry machine," "Stove [called gas in Persian] is in the kitchen [not on the streets]" or "Go home and bathe your baby [instead of driving]." I witnessed a number of these incidences while riding with these women in both cities. Belghies, one of the drivers in Isfahan, viewed constant exposure to abusive language and behaviors during the day as the main feature of the job that made it masculine and irreconcilable with what she described as the essence of femininity:

*A woman is very delicate and sensitive. A woman needs more attention and kindness than a man. Now, although we are ignoring this side of our feelings [laughing] but generally all women are like this. For example, I expect special attention from my brother; all girls expect this from their dads and after marrying from their husbands. Now you look at our conditions as women who drive in streets of this city filled with reckless drivers; anyone says something to you! Imagine how it impacts your emotions! I mean we have been super strong that we haven't gone out of our minds yet [laughing]. Not all men are gentle, God bless them! Some of them are really rude! Imagine! God forbids you make a tiny mistake! I wish they would only say you are driving like a cow! They use words that you cannot even think of. Really dirty words! These are the things that make it a masculine job!*

In many cases, a woman's decision to become a taxi driver was undermined by others. Participants, reported facing unexpected statements, behaviors, or suggestions, in most cases from men in different positions, which revealed to them how their career choices and performances were "sexualized" by others. For example, when I reached out to Ziba, one of the taxi drivers in Isfahan, for an interview as she was waiting for riders on a street corner, she accepted with hesitation. The last time she and a number of her colleagues were reached for an interview had been by a man, who introduced himself as a film writer and director wanting to compile a documentary about drivers of women-only taxis, their life stories, and challenges. The interview, however, had gone into an unexpected direction. As Ziba recited, his questions had turn out to be based on the premise that drivers of women-only taxis only do this job as a last resort for economic survival and thus must be open to casual inter-sex relations or temporary marriages as alternative and easier sources of income. In a similar incidence, Azar, a mother of two children and married to a man with physical disability at the time of interviews, had become alerted about public misperceptions of drivers of women-only taxis:

*A while ago, I had just dropped a passenger off in Sepahan Shahr when I noticed the car driving behind me was flashing his lights and honking. I pulled over and so did he. I said, "Is there anything wrong?" and he said "Excuse me, lady! I saw your face and felt you are lonely! I wanted to know if you are single or married and if you would like to become friends with me [go on a date with me.]" See! Just like this! Just like this! From his two-minute observation that I was a taxi driver and was dropping a passenger off, he had concluded that I was lonely and thus helpless! I said "No! I am, in fact, very happy and have no interest in such relations!"*

When asked what in her view caused such incidents, Azar responded:

*People think all drivers of women-only taxis are divorced and as you know, after divorce usually people go through depression. This person had such an assumption and wanted to see if there was anything like that was going on in my life. But I say even if a person is divorced and lonely, there is no reason for her to downgrade herself by jumping into a relationship with anyone who approaches her.*

In a similar narrative, Parisa, one of the drivers in Tehran, divorced and mother of one, recounted an intimidating conversation with a bank teller while filling out a loan application:

*I was introduced to Sandogh E Mehr E Reza [a micro-finance institute for supporting female breadwinners] by our company to get a loan and finance my taxi. As he was giving me the paperwork to fill out, the guy told me: "Maam! Why do you want to finance a taxi? There are tons of men out there who are looking for temporary partners and will happily provide for you [...] I tore up all the papers right in his face, and left the place with tears in my eyes.*

These processes of sexualization were also reified in instances in which women's decision to becoming taxi drivers were interpreted as their intention to covertly signal their sexual availability. Setareh, a driver of a mixed-gender van in Tehran, for example, recounted:

*I never get off my van because they will talk behind my back that her mantox [the long shirt and a standard part of women's dress code] is too tight or short or she wants to present herself to men.*

In one of the focus groups held in Tehran, women discussed among themselves whether or not permission to pick up male passengers would benefit them. One of the women remarked:

*Of course we would make a better income if we were allowed to pick up male riders. But I still prefer not to do it because the perception in our society is that all female taxi drivers are bread winners of their families and thus single. Some of the men ask for your phone number or if you can be their personal driver [getting into a casual relationship] the moment they sit in your car.*

Zhaleh, my other participant, who had quit this job at the time of the interview, shared with me, with ineffable enthusiasm and pride, her stories of years of working from sunrise to midnight to provide for herself and her only son. She had enjoyed all the experiences, networks, and economic independence she had obtained despite all of its challenges. However, she had promised her son to quit the job as soon as he graduated from law school and had done so. When I asked about the reasons for her son's disagreement with this job, she responded:

*He did not like the public judgment about drivers of women-only taxis. For example, one day he said: "Mom! I was coming back from the university with one of the guys in our department who is actually smart but a yob (lat o loot), and he bluntly said [about the drivers of women only taxis]: they are all perverts (khanom Raees)."*

Similarly, Soosan, from Tehran, and a divorced and a mother of one adult boy stated:

*It is getting better but the public perception of us is that we are perverted and promiscuous women. Women who have no family honor and anyone to look after them […] Sometimes I worry that my own son or relatives judge me the same way. This is not fair! I just get 4 hours of sleep every night and work 2 shifts. Now those people who judge our morals, manners, and skills… how would they want to make it up to us? A person like me who is pulling her own weight and works day and night…,who has got the right to overlook her abilities and morals?"*

This pattern is also reported by other studies on women's experiences in male jobs in which men in similar or superior positions express their dominance by devaluing women's professionalism and career choices (Pogrebin and Poole, 1997 & 1998; Benya, 2017; Yoder and Aniakudo, 1996; Rosell et al., 1995; Woodfield, 2016). In a context such as Iran, where work as a whole is predominantly masculine, women experience such encounters in many jobs. For example, Fatemeh, who was working as a truck driver at the time of the interview, recounted an experience from the time she had been trying to open her own women-only taxi firm:

*I went after the paperwork to register a women-only taxi firm in my town [...] after a while, I was told that I should meet with the deputy of [my county]. When I went to his office, he said: "Maam! A taxi service company with drivers being women will cause moral pervertedness in the town!" I said: How?! Why?! He responded, "It is not that you are the one who wants to cause corruption or immorality! You hire some women as drivers and they may do something wrong." Then he brought up the case of a lady who had opened an indoor swimming pool for women and then a video of women swimming was leaked and circulated in the city which had caused a couple of those women to commit suicide […] I was like, "How this could be related to women's taxi service company?!" I was very heartbroken and disappointed after that meeting; I almost blacked out!*

Fatemeh's experience was particularly noteworthy because she was a self-identified religious woman, volunteering for religious community events, and pronouncing her religious identity by wearing chaador, the most conservative form of hejab in Iran's context. Following all the codes of dignity, the vice governor's statement had come as a shock to her.

Taxi drivers also reported other difficulties such as discriminatory behaviors of different institutions, police officers and, in many cases, passengers. In Esfahan, women had been trying for years to obtain an official stop signs installed in different regions of the city for women-only

taxis. However, by the time of my interviews they only had achieved one official taxi stop. Having designated stops was an important issue for them since it could save them a tremendous amount of time and energy during the day. Without stops they had serious challenges in finding suitable parking spots for their waiting time until they were hailed. The population density in Esfahan is 8,992 persons per square mile, and as one would expect, the parking situation is not generally good. Therefore, stops could help women tremendously by allowing them to claim exclusive access to certain spaces on crowded street sides. This is how Azar, the representative of drivers in Esfahan described the stops issue:

*After a decade we only have one official stop for women's taxis, and this one stop is the fruit of our 8 years of attempts and negotiations with the city administration. Why don't they give us official stops? Isn't 8 years of waiting enough? Most of the time we have to double park, or stop in front of some one's driveway... While unintended, it is distracting to other people, and the police officers insult us for causing trouble. A while ago, when a couple of my co-workers were waiting to be called on, a police officer reached and condemned them in a very brutal way for making that street corner their "hangout." This is very interesting, isn't it?! We are out on the streets to work and this country's police officer says we are just hanging out!*

A noteworthy issue is that even that the one granted stop area was working against rather than serving women's interests. The stop was located close to a major intersection across from the spot women used to wait for riders prior to the installation of the official women-only taxi stop sign. However, the old spot was in the vicinity of the most famous hotel in the city and a number of shopping malls, where many tourists and ride hailers would wait for a ride. With the installment of the official stop sign on the other side of the intersection, women were practically relocated to a semi-secluded side—a very unlikely area in which for passengers to look for rides. Many of my participants still stopped in their old spots to pick up passengers, but almost all had received tickets at least once and were verbally harassed by police officers. One of the scenes I witnessed included a number of drivers stopping in their old spots and taking turns watching for police officers so they could quickly move to other locations to avoid receiving tickets.

Women also believed that police officers scrutinize them more strictly than they do male taxi drivers or regular drivers. For example, Soraya, one of the drivers in Isfahan, widowed, and mother of one young girl, recounted:

*I remember in my first work day I had double parked on the street side, waiting to be called on. There were 10 something other cars parking behind and in front of me. The officer simply told them to move: Sir! Move your car! Madam! Move your car! But as he was reaching me, he was already stamping a ticket for me. I said: I am leaving! He replied sarcastically: "No worries! You can stay if you want!" and then he put the ticket under my wiper… I told him: "How nice would it be if people understood others situations a bit more." The law must apply to everyone equally! There is nowhere in our law that says others can park here but I must not! Everyone is equal! This is one example of how our society treats women.*

Such discrimination, in many drivers' views, was used to intimidate them to the extent that they gave up doing this job. Shohreh, another driver in Esfahan, divorced and a mother of one, was very frustrated with police behavior, saying:

*Why should they be so hard on us? Because we have had to choose this job to survive? If they don't like it they should provide us with resources so we do not (have to) do this job.*

But the discriminatory behaviors did not come solely from the authority figures. In many cases taxi drivers brought up examples of passengers who avoided riding with them. For example, Setareh, who worked on a mixed gender van in Tehran, said she believed:

*People do not have that level of awareness and culture [to accept a female van driver]. I stop in front of many female ride hailers with an empty van and many of them don't get in.*

Malmal from Tehran recalled:

*It has happened to me so many times that I stop in front of women and they just ignore me! I have seen them hailing for cabs in front of me but when I hunk the horn for them, they don't even look at me. In the beginning it was very hard for me to be ignored but now I am used to it.*

While many drivers thought that such behavior come from low-educated and traditional-minded people, Zari, a driver of women-only taxis who worked at the international airport of Tehran, recounted an experience which suggests otherwise:

*One time in the airport, it was my turn to be called on. A lady had requested taxi from our center with a preference for male drivers. I reached out to her and said: ma'am it is my turn! she said: I*

*rather go with a man, I don't think you can find my address. I said: how do you know I cannot find it? she said: I want to go to the bar association. I said: I know where it is, it is on vozara's street. She accepted and came with me. In the car, as we were going to the bar association, I asked her: "Excuse me ma'am! Are you a lawyer"? She responded, "Yes!" I said: "I am sorry, but I feel so bad for your clients!" She was shocked! I said, "When you, as a female lawyer, overlook my rights as a female taxi driver, what can I expect from others? Imagine you are sitting in an office next to a male lawyer and the clients say they prefer to hire your male colleague. Frankly, wouldn't it break your heart?" She said, "Truthfully, you are right!"*

Drawing on stereotypical accounts of women's driving and navigations skills, many riders, based on my participants' statements, refuse female drivers' service, thereby perpetuating an unfriendly and not very promising market for their work.

The narratives of these women reveal deeply-rooted processes that masculinize the work of taxi driving and render these women's engagement in the job an unfit line of work. The mechanisms of gendering and sexualization were manifested in women's institutional and interpersonal encounters, thus marking the day-to-day life of working as a female taxi driver as one with struggles of negotiating irreconcilable identities and bargaining with discrimination and inequality. As scholars have long argued, space is a social construct which intersects with social constructs of gender, sexuality, race, etc., in shaping individual spatial experiences (Massey 1991; Smith 1993; McDowell 1997; Rose, 1993). Depending on how they are situated within social hierarchies, individuals expand different levels of understanding and experiences with the same Cartesian locations. For many of these women, a taxi was revealed to be a medium that had transformed their spatial navigation and negotiations. While driving taxis, these women were experiencing the same physical spaces in substantially different ways than before they became drivers. For example, Mojdeh, one of the drivers in Tehran, commented:

*We have all manned up and are doing this masculine job! But we still break down! Still get harassed in the streets! We still break down when a driver cuts in front of us and says "gas"[4] is in kitchen. I used to drive a nice, brand new car before I had to take this taxi; even when I was*

[4] "Gas" in Farsi is used for both oven and car's accelerator pedal.

*driving opposite traffic on a one-way alley, male drivers would respectfully let me pass because I was a lady driving a nice car. But now with the taxi, even when I am driving the right way, the other car pulls over and trash talks me because they think we are bunch of respect less, homeless women who drive taxis. But if you go and talk to each one of our co-workers you see they are all dignified, and respectable women.*

In face of these difficulties, many of these women were finding it unavoidable to adjust their behaviors and the image they were presenting in the public sphere as strategies necessary for overcoming the difficulties of working in a sex-atypical job. For example, in one of the focus groups in Tehran, Yasi, a divorced woman and mother of two, recited her story of riding with another female driver before she received her own taxi:

*As we were driving, a car cut in front of her car and she shouted: "Hoshshshsh!" I was like! [Shocked!]. I was a super gentle and intricate lady back then and was almost having a heart attack in her car! I was like, "Holy moly! Why is this woman so rude?! I was cringing the whole time. When we got to the inspection store, there was a line of cars at the entrance; she took her hand out of the window and shouted [addressing the car in front of us], "Hey you! Move your ass!" Look! Hands out of car windows was not even defined for me at that time! It was not digestible! But now! I am always out of the window from here [pointing to her waist].*

Describing her colleague's behavior as irreconcilable with her original sense of what it meant to be feminine, Yasi viewed the changes she witnessed in her own style as an inevitable response to her working conditions. There were adjustments that she had to make in order to survive the atmosphere facing her as a taxi driver. Along the same lines, Mehri, one of the drivers in Isfahan said:

*We are male! Because our behavior has changed, we are more rough now. Even our behavior towards our husbands and kids have changed. We have become masculine [...] We have become disobedient and recalcitrant. This is a reality! Look! When a lady like you drives, she never can behave towards men the same way I do if they want to overpower me. My behavior is masculine, but you cannot be like me. I have been in this job for 6 years.*

The comparison she made between herself as a taxi driver in dealing with a male driver who tried to overpower her, and me as a "lady" whom she knew as a university student doing the

clean (feminine) job of studying and researching, demonstrates how taxi driving, in her view, was transforming her gender performances in the public arena.

*On the engineering sites:*

While working in substantially different conditions, my engineer participants too were struggling with the institutionalized masculinity in their work sphere and intensively "gendered" and "sexualized" work environment. For my engineer participants too, threats of sexual harassment and sexualization of the work atmosphere were central to their understanding and interpretations of on-site engineering. In many cases, they viewed the predominance of these incidences at construction or industrial sites as the main impediment to their advancement. Azadeh, a young, passionate architect with a long and successful work history, emphasized the importance for architects to have an active presence at construction sites, and how the issue of safety particularly disadvantages women:

*When you design something, it is a real privilege if you can be involved in the construction process, if you can do site visits and participate in construction meetings. You can get the information you need easily with a site visit. Otherwise it takes you a long time until you get that information from others. Most often, sites are in the suburbs and more than hours of drive outside the city. For men, it is easier to jump into their car and drive to the site at any time, during the official hours or after that. For women, however, it is more difficult to manage to do this. If you drive by yourself to visit the site, there is no guaranty about your safety. All laborers there, are male and most of the times there is no guard. At least you need to make sure that the construction supervisor is there when you go. Men do not have to worry about these issues as much as we do and this saves them a sufficient amount of time and energy.*

Here Azadeh views the potential of being harassed as an integral feature of visiting the sites as a woman. However, the issue was not limited to sites: Azadeh, like many other women in the study, found the environment of companies an unsafe one for women. At the time of the interview, she was teaching part time at a private college while running her own start-up company. She emphasized her conscious efforts to warn her female students about what she perceived as hostile and sexualized work environments for female architects:

*At most, ten to twenty percent of girls and women have the right perception of how to perform in workplaces: what to wear and how to behave. There are things that no one prepares you for in college. For example, in many large and famous companies, male managers and CEOs have no shame in reaching out to their female employees for sexual relationships. Many of them are well-known in Isfahan for this. I always tell my female students to be cautious about such threats when they do internships. I want them to at least have this in mind because when I was in their stage, I did not realize the meaning behind certain behaviors.*

This is the type of atmosphere that other studies, especially about male-dominated and masculine environments, have reported (Ainsworth et al., 2016; Hannagan, 2016; Benya, 2017; Pogrebin and Poole, 1997 & 1998). Women in my study viewed their working environments, whether it was on the street or at engineering sites, as imbued with masculine practices of sexual advances and misconduct. Anahita, a chemical engineer in Terhran who was working at an international corporation, remembered:

*All of my three supervisors are married but as a woman, if you accept to become more intimate with them [referring to sexual relation] they help you more in work. Even male employees know this about one of them and make jokes. This is why I do everything I can so I do not have to deal with him (one particular male supervisor).*

In some instances engineers reported being intimidated by witnessing men playing pornographic videos on their cellphones or hearing their over-sexualized language. In one of the focus groups, Nasim, a civil engineer who was the executive manager of a construction project in Isfahan, said:

*The other day I was checking out some stuff on one of the floors and noticed a couple of workers were watching a porn video and saying disgusting things! They stopped it when they noticed me, but I felt so disgusted!*

Some women also reported incidents of stalking. For example, Raha, a mechanical engineer in Isfahan recalled:

*I had to get a second cellphone line for my job and separate it from my personal line because I was receiving unnecessary phone calls from male engineers and technicians outside of working hours.*

In such situations, women did not feel protected with regard to reporting such concerns to anyone at work, as it could be used against them, as we can infer from Saghar's experience below:

*I had a telephone stalker for a two or three months. He knew exactly what I was doing at any moment in the field and would text me; you just arrived with your mom, you are wearing this; you just ate this! Everything! Everything! I consulted some of my friends and they recommended that I tell my boss. But I did not want to do this because I knew he would simply eliminate me rather than catching the stalker! He would say if I substitute her with a man, I won't have to deal with these side stories. So I hired a lawyer and filed a case and eventually the issue was resolved.*

Without formalized pathways for women to report practices of harassment, they were left with their own personal resources, undergoing much pressure to resolve such issues and still perform perfectly in their own work duties. This placed employers in a privileged position if they were to replace women with male engineers. About this issue, Raha, a mechanical engineer in Isfahan who was working as the executive manager of an international company, pointed out:

*From the smallest thing, which is getting the permit to enter Mojtama E Foulad [Iran's largest steel production factory] for site visits, being a woman causes troubles for you and your manager. Many people have problem with my manager that why your executive engineer is a woman? There is no doubt that this creates a dilemma in my boss's mind that should I keep her because of her credentials or should I replace her with a man to get rid of unnecessary problems?*

In some cases, women believed that employers did not bother to assign women to executive positions which require constant on-site activities to avoid such "side" troubles. This was a disappointment to many women like Saghar who were particularly interested in on-site activities:

*The reason I chose civil engineering as my major was to end up in executive (on-site) type of jobs. When I got my first job in a company, I did not have the guts to tell them that I wanted to work in the executive branch [rather than design]. I knew they would not accept it because they were a couple of men in the company and it was easier for them to send men to the field. Workers do not easily accept female supervisors and it causes troubles for manager. It took me a lot of negotiations until I could prove that I can handle the job.*

Not only women viewed the threats of sexual misconduct as a prevalent issue in their working environments: in some cases, they reported being accused of engaging in casual relations, as means used by colleagues or supervisors to denigrate them. Andisheh, a highly achieved chemical engineer recounted one of these experiences:

*When your colleagues envy your professional progress, they put unfair burdens on your way. One time when I was getting a promotion because of the new formula I had developed for the factory […] after a while my manager called me into his office and said there is a rumor circling around that you take a ride from [one of the male technicians] to home [referring to being in a relationship].*

Soolmaz, an electrical engineer in Isfahan and the head of the quality control department of a large local factory, stated:

*It is very difficult and heartbreaking for a women to be accused of being in [a sexual] relationship with her boss. They say such things to push you out, but you have to ignore what you hear [like a deaf person] to keep your job.*

Accounts like this show how women's efforts to advance in their jobs evoke pessimism toward their level of professionalism. This pessimism was manifested in judgments, practices, and behaviors that women were witnessing, and which acted to destabilize the gendered expectations of women in work in any form. In Sooreh's experience (an architect in Isfahan) staying late at work for women came with specific prices that did not apply to men:

*Many times you have to stay in the field by 11 p.m. or later. This is not defined for Iranian families to see their daughters return home that late at night. They ask why do you have to stay so late?! Residents of the neighborhoods where are construction fields are located many times complain about the fact that a bunch of young boys and girls stay late at night in a half-built building. But even worse, we have to respond to our own bosses for staying late. Some of them simply say you waste your time during the day so you stay late. You have to respond to everyone as a woman for doing your work!*

In some organizations, such as Mojtame E Foulad in Isafahan, the largest steel producer in the MENA region, there were regulations for limiting the time and frequency that female engineers could visit and work inside various sites. As a quick note, Mojtam E Foulad had no

official female employee in the engineering and technical sectors. Women such as Neda, Najmeh, and Raha, all part of my sample, shared experiences about working at private contractor companies, doing particular projects for Mojtam E Foulad. Regarding work permits for women, Neda recounted:

*Like Cinderella, who could only stay so long in that party [otherwise her magical clothing would disappear], our work permits only were valid only until 3 or 4 p.m. There were times that we had so much to do that we would lose track of time. The doormen and guards would treat us like they had caught a thief: 'Why are you here?' 'What have you been doing until so late?' They would contact our managers in the company, causing another headache for them to justify that we had had to be there for work.*

Women also talked about incidents that were featured by "heightened practices of masculinity" (Prokos and padavic, 2002). Such practices involved languages and behaviors that deemed women (and their femininity) unfit for those particular working conditions. For example, in construction projects, reaching the top floors of the building under construction using tower cranes was constructed as a masculine practice based on women's narratives. This limited their mobility and served as a mechanism for marginalization. As Saghar described:

*Many men wanted to make an impression that I was not well suited for the executive job. It was easy for to jump on the crane, visit the top floors, and then come down and discuss the details. I could not participate in their discussions without seeing the details for myself; I could not have my opinion heard. Then I thought, "Iif I climb the mountain I can ride the crane too," and I started doing it. Then they saw I do everything and started accepting me.*

In other cases, women struggled to obtain information from male workers, technicians, contractors, etc. — an essential part of their job as on-site engineers. For example, Najmeh, who was working as a gas inspector for various construction projects in Isfahan, recounted a story in which a man avoided providing her full access to the building she was scheduled to inspect:

*Once I was to inspect a building in the suburb. The executive manager appeared to be a gentleman based on his style and manners at the first glance. But, he took me inside the building from a back door rather than the main entrance and did not give me time to inspect the whole building the way I wanted. He wanted to rush things and have me out. I noticed a couple of technical issues and warned him but he was insulted that I was giving him technical advice. I stopped the inspection and did not approve the building of course…… [Najmeh, gas inspector]*

Heightened performances of masculinity were also manifested in actions or behaviors from men to intimidate or explicitly denigrate women. Scholars have argued that masculinity becomes most bold when it is challenged in some form, such as when men lose their jobs, enter feminine contexts, or when women enter masculine domains (Prokos and padavic, 2002; Ainsworth et al., 2014). When the contextual regularities and norms that maintain the scene for men's performances of masculinity are unsettled in some way, heightened practices of masculinity serve as a way for them to re-establish and enforce boundaries with femininity. My participants' stories of being teased or intimated by men provide examples of how their working environments were constructed as men's domains and how women were pushed outside symbolic boundaries of belonging. According to these accounts, women became tools of construction and practices of masculinity, as in the following quote:

*I was doing my tests in the lab and suddenly the instrument went off […] I thought there was power outage but [from the lab window facing the manufacturing salon] saw that all machines were working. [I walked down to the salon] and checked the fuse box. One fuse had cut off and I switched it back on. I noticed a couple of male laborers were whispering. I did not say anything and went back to my work. After 2 or 3 minutes the power went off again and the same persons were whispering [but they denied doing anything]. I told their supervisors later and he pretended to be surprised; he assured that the laborers will be punished […] Later, when I got to know the laborers and made a better relationship with them, I learned that it was the supervisor, an engineer with a master's degree, behind the whole story." [Andisheh, chmical engineer form Isfahan]*

Women also provided examples of how their personal lives, including belongings and emotions, were targeted by men's heightened practices of masculinity:

*Sometimes to scare or threaten you, men do things as crazy as flattening your tire or scratching your car. I have seen all of these with my own eyes. To push you out of the competition, deteriorate your status and take your place they do everything. So, for women it is extremely hard to remain in these jobs [Sooreh, architect, from Isfahan]*

*There were many times that workers or technicians tried to intimidate me by things as silly as lizard or roach. I am scared of insects to death, but I had to hold my breath while shaking inside or pretend that I do not care. [Soolmaz, Electrical engineer from Isfahan]*

These incidences went hand in hand with questioning women's credibility. Most women reported putting extra effort into convincing others of being the right person for the job. In addition to the added time and energy this took from women, the emotional and mental pressures impacted their daily lives and livelihoods. Raha, the head of the engineering department of a large company in Isfahan, for example, remarked:

*Many times that I have been close to collapsing. I am not a person who easily cries, but there have been many times that I have sat in my car and cried out because I have been under pressure. When you are not trusted and accepted in your job, there is a constant emotional pressure on you. I mean, there is always a constant pressure on me because I feel that I should not be here. A man with same credentials can save the company from many problems.*

On a similar note, Sogand and Neda, both electrical engineers in Isfahan said:

*In our job, being a woman shows itself. There are differences in the ways men and women are treated and in wage. Most often in the field, they do not accept you or look down on you. You should prove that you can do the job and then they will treat you better. In our working environments when they see a woman is making a good progress, they somehow burden her progress. I still love this major and job, but it takes a lot of energy and time of your life that one day you open your eyes and see your life is gone [Sogand].*

*I was the only female in our engineering team for a project and it was difficult, especially in the beginning. They would not share information with me easily or would whisper things and laugh. In the meetings with other engineers, too, it was very tough for me to be the only woman. I could not make my opinion heard. At times I had to go to the bathroom, cry a bit, release myself emotionally and then get back to the meetings [Neda].*

While engineers were secured from some consequences of stereotypical assumptions about women in gender-atypical jobs, as reported by taxi drivers, they too reflected on numerous experiences and encounters in which their career choices were downgraded. As Aker (1990) noted, gendering of work and organizations occurs through complex mechanisms which segregate men and women into different careers. Gender stereotypes and cultural beliefs about gender serve as supporting mechanisms for sex segregation in work, while also putting forward predominant beliefs about segregation as a natural and functional phenomenon. When men and women are viewed as essentially different, occupational segregation becomes a predictable form

of logic. For engineers this process of gendering was manifested in different forms. Some of the women in the study reported encounters and conversations both inside and outside the workplace which were aimed at discouraging them from choosing or remaining in their jobs. Sogand, a highly successful electrical engineer in Esfahan, for example, remarked:

*My friend's brother lives in Australia and every time he sees me he shakes head at me for doing this job. He says, "What kind of a job is this? One week you are in Bandar Abbas (south of Iran), one week, somewhere else. What do you want to prove after all? Even in Australia where girls are free to do everything, they don't choose these jobs."*

In one of the focus groups in Isfahan, Sarah, an industrial engineer, said:

*The other day I was overworked and super tired. One of our technicians said to me, "Why do you insist to work?! You are a feminist and are trying to prove that women can do this work! [Uou hurt yourself for this]." I said to him, "Why should not I work?! Have I studied all these years to stay at home?!"*

Other participants reported receiving similar comments from family members, friends, and co-workers, questioning the fit between their conditions and characteristics as women and their working conditions. Marriage and starting a family in particular were depicted as irreconcilable with on-site engineering. For example, Soolmaz, another motivated and self-perceived successful electrical engineer in Esfahan, recounted a conversation she had with a visiting male engineer who came to her factory:

*He suggested to me to change my job. He said: "Ma'am! So far as you are working here, you won't accept to marry any of these workers because they are lower than you in status. There is no male engineer in your age range in this factory to see you either. You are spending most of your time during the day here and you won't have a chance to meet someone."*

Drawing on a paradigm that views marriage as a priority over work for women, such accounts viewed on-site engineering as a mismatch with the entire spectrum of what is viewed as being a woman. This paradigm is marked by traditional gender beliefs and essentialist views that presume women are the primary caretakers of the household, a notion that releases men from the

responsibility to adjust their expectations and attitudes based on women's particular conditions.

Nasim, a single civil engineer, said she was told by her boss:

*This job limits your options for marriage! When you supervise a bunch of men during the day as a female engineer, no man has the guts to ask you to cook for them or do their laundry at home. When girls get their high school diploma, they eliminate low educated, low skilled men from their marriage pool. When they get their bachelor's (degree), they cut out men like merchandisers. When they get graduate degrees, a large percentage of engineers are out of their pool and with these types of jobs, another large portion of men escape them.*

In this account, women like Nasim are de-feminized based on a logic that places engineering education and work style at odds with one's capacity to perform womanhood. This logic, in the narratives of many women such as Andiesheh, was translated into discouragement or warnings against pursuing jobs in their field:

*I was in a condition that I had to work; both professionally and financially. I met with one of my professors in college and told him I am looking for jobs. I clearly remember his sentence when he asked: "Do you really want to work? Open a childcare center!" I was shocked! Had I studied so hard to get admitted into a prestigious engineering program to end up opening a child care center?!*

On a similar note, Afraa, a successful material engineer, said:

*When I started looking for jobs, the first person I reached out for help said to me, "What do you want to do with this major? If you were a man, at least you could get into the manufacturing business. Now what do you want to do?" This is how they disappoint you from the beginning.*

In many cases, female engineers decide to turn their backs on the years spent on education and subsequently seeking jobs in fields irrelevant to their background. For example, Saghar, the executive manager of a major construction project in Isfahan, was planning to leave her job and start her own catering business at the time of our interview. Sogand, who was tired of all the struggles pertaining to her job, was hopping to become a certified trainer and open a gym with her friends. While individuals are free to make decisions, and, changing jobs can be helpful to one's health and well-being, Andisheh lamented the hostile environments that, in her view, systematically push women from jobs relevant to their skills and backgrounds:

*My chemist friend is working as a yoga trainer now. Why did she leave her job as a chemist? Because of all the harassment in the factory she worked for […] I do not mean to undermine her current job, but it is a shame that all those years she spent in college to get her master's are useless now. Why should men make conditions so hard for women so they eventually leave their jobs? Nobody told us that these majors are just for men so why do they make the working conditions so bad for women so they voluntarily leave their jobs?*

Women who were more advanced in their careers believed that their family lives were targeted by those who were looking to weaken their status. For example, Senobar a senior civil engineer, who was co-managing a construction firm with her husband, recounted a situation in which she had decided to fire their executive director after witnessing a number of technical misdoings:

*When he came to the company for his final paycheck, he told me, "You put your family life in jeopardy with this job." I want to tell you the extent to which, men in the workplace target the sensitive issues in your personal life and my family life was impacted by issues like this so many times.*

In many cases the impact of this gendering was so strong that women, themselves, were convinced that the job contradicted their own sense of femininity. Sorour, for example, a mechanical engineer in her late twenties who was single at the time of the interview, believed that working in a masculine domain has impacted her emotions:

*I feel great about my job. But at the end of the day, I feel like men are not attracted to women who miss the feminine delicacies. Very often I ask myself, 'If you were a man would you be fine with a woman like yourself?' And I think, 'No!' As a man I would want my wife to act feminine and have feminine emotions […] I even feel that mothers who have masculine manners cannot be successful moms. I always fear that I won't be a good mother [because of the ways my manners have changed by my job].*

Nasim, a civil engineer from Isfahan, believed that the struggles of her work do not leave women like her the energy needed for a family life:

*At the end of the day, you are so tired that you cannot go do feminine stuff like shopping, or going to a beauty salon […] When you get home sometimes you are so mentally occupied or angry with work stuff, that you simply cannot deal with anyone, let alone a husband who has certain expectations from you.*

Masculinity was so imbedded in the construction of engineering in women's narratives that they found it irreconcilable with what they viewed as demands and necessities of performing their identities as a woman. Based on West and Zimmerman's (1987) account, gender constantly is "done" at the interpersonal level; the "doing" is integrated into every-day practices, even in seemingly gender-neutral contexts such work organizations. In many ways, doing one's job is interwoven into the "doing" of gender. In my participants' experiences, however, their jobs were masculinized in a way that their "doings" of femininity outside work were interrupted. As Ahoo, a mechanical engineer in Isfahan, put it:

*I would not recommend my major to other girls. I think I would guide them to art or humanities. At the end of the day, in engineering atmospheres you suppress your feminine feelings as a woman. You lose your mental energy and time to take care of yourself, dress up, wear make-up, do your hair etc.... Those girls in other majors (more feminine) are happier, spend enough time with their families, travel, workout, and sometimes make more money than us.*

She continued: *"I will leave this job consciously and voluntarily if I want to become a mother. This job is not compatible with motherhood."* Sharareh, a single agricultural engineer, who revealed during the interview that she extremely passionate about her job, argued:

*[Married] women cannot survive in masculine environments. After a while they give up because it impacts their family lives. For example, they may lose the emotions they are supposed to have towards their husbands.*

On a similar topic, Saghar believed that masculine nature of the job impacts women's opportunities in the marriage market:

*One of the problems we have for marriage is that once they learn that we are dealing with men from morning to the evening, half of the people who approach us leave.*

**Closing Remarks: Discourse of Empowerment**

As I mentioned before, the literature on women's entrance into male-dominated sectors in the Western context dates to the 1970s. This literature is rich and covers a broad range of

historically masculine fields such as medicine, law, engineering and masculine blue collar jobs such as military, law enforcement, and firefighting. These studies address a broad range of issues, including women's identity work and different in which they navigate feminine identities and masculine working conditions (Ainsworth, 2014; Sasson-Levy, 2013; Baaz and Stern, 2013; Garcia, 2003), challenges facing them to find their way into these careers and in workplace environments (Yoder and Aniakudo, 1996; Rosell et al., 1995; Yoder and Berendsen, 2001) and structural inefficiencies for assisting women to obtain equal status to men in these career fields (Melchionne, 1967).

Studies on women's work in non-traditional service sector careers provide unique insights on how women construct identities as they negotiate their way into masculine domains, and how masculinities and femininities are accomplished in work (Ainsworth et al., 2014). In particular, many scholars have found it crucial to examine the types of femininities that are constructed in such contexts by women. In some cases, scholars have observed that women participate in the gender hierarchy by adopting masculine traits of performance; in others it has been shown that performances of femininity become more pronounced among women in order to maintain their differences with men. A large body of studies has explored women in the military, for example (Diamond, 2005; Harel-Shalev et al., 2017; Hannagan, 2016; Rosellini et al., 2017; Doan and Portillo, 2016). In her work on military women in Israel, Sasson-Levy (2003) argues that female soldiers actually participate in the hegemonic gender regime of military through negotiating identities distanced from "traditional femininity," "emulating" masculine military performance, and through the "trivialization of sexual harassment." Baaz and Stern (2013), however, show that female soldiers in the Republic of Congo uniquely integrate the "masculine" elements of being fighters with the "feminine" traits of being a woman and wife. In the U.S.

context, Silva (2008) shows how women in her sample construct the military as a space for resisting traditional gender norms, while at the same time aspiring to maintain feminine traits, especially those associated with motherhood.

Studies on women in other blue-collar jobs provide valuable insights for understanding women's gender performance and constructions of femininity. Lawson (2004) discussed the difficulties women face in attracting customers' trust, building relationships with supervisors, opening ways into the network of male colleagues, and navigating their feminine identities in careers that are highly associated with masculinity. She further explores different strategies that women pursue to overturn these difficulties, observing a spectrum of strategies ranging from adopting stereotypically masculine working styles to applying feminine traits to advance in a dealership career. Law enforcement and policing are other masculine jobs, where women's participation is explored (Melchionne, 1967; Rabe-Hemp and Beichner, 2011; Sherman, 1975; Wexler, 1985; Schulze, 2010; Rabe-Hemp, 2009; Garcia, 2003). Some studies, for another example, observe a binary among women in how they construct and negotiate identities as policewomen. Martin (1980) explored conflicts between gender and occupational roles as experienced by women. She observed that in reaction to incompatibilities between being a woman and a police officer (as a heavily masculine job), some women stress their gender identities by adopting the role of the policeWOMAN and some distancing themselves from feminine gender traits by adopting the identity of the POLICEwoman. As some studies have shown, those women who attempt to accomplish the masculine ideal of policing are at the risk of being targeted by mysoginic labeling, while those who try to embolden their feminine identities are undermined as weak and not fitting into the job, given that public perceptions toward policewomen are shaped by gender stereotypes (Miller, 1999; Grant, 2000). At the same time,

there are studies that shed light on unique ways that policewomen do approach gender and policing simultaneously and “collaboratively” (Rabe-Hemp, 2009).

While studies of women in masculine jobs in the Western context show a range of treatments of gender systems by women, my data as a whole suggests that Iranian women in these jobs are better off if they distance themselves from masculine practices. This was evident particularly among taxi drivers but, to some extent, also with engineers. Drawing on a discourse that featured patience, consistency, and resilience, many of these women argued that even under the most unfriendly conditions it is possible for women to continue fighting the battle. As Shadi, a civil engineer in Isfahan argued:

*This is Iran. No one cares to keep you in your job because you are an educated and experienced woman. If I don’t stay, there are tens of jobless men that can take my place. No one takes your back or offer you particular supports because you are doing a masculine job. It is you who must establish your position and show that you are there to stay.*

While the issues facing my participants are not unique to them or to Iranian women, with a lack of institutional and discursive interventions for improving women’s conditions, these women had to creatively carve out empowering spaces for themselves in their workplaces to maintain their jobs. In the face of working environments in which practices of masculinity were normalized and constructions of work and masculinity were intertwined, many of these women managed to maintain their optimism, do their jobs, and feel good about making good use of their skills and education. This mechanism of empowerment involved intense identity work and negotiations by women to define and defend their career choices and capabilities.

In some ways, these women’s discourses about and strategies for empowerment were not consistent with liberal blue-prints for achieving equality. For example, most often, interventions for empowering women aim to create spaces for them to speak up, to be expressive about their challenges, and to stand against oppression by making their voices heard. For many of my

participants, however, the strategic use of silence (Gatwiri and Mubi, 2016) turned out to be more efficient in establishing their positions in their workplace and in protecting their status than was the case for the strategic use of voice. Working in male-dominant professions had taught them that being outspoken does not always serve their best interest, and many of them had learned to express their agency through employing silence when necessary. For example, Safoora, a woman in her 40s and a civil engineer and CEO of a construction company, said that women who enter the world of business must be very cautious about what they say and must avoid having too much visibility:

*Just like a brain that is covered by skull and skin, women sometimes must veil their ideas and attitudes to avoid being burdened.*

Safoora was a well-known engineer in her professional community; she was introduced to me by several male members of the construction engineering organization in Isfahan as a well-established female engineer. Despite her high-level position, she believed that it is women's ability to strategically and subtly apply silence when necessary, rather than overtly expressing their ideas to gain attention, that eventually secures their positions in male-dominated professions. In the same way, Salma, a young electrical engineer in her 20s, who had a supervisory-level job in an LED lamp factory in Isfahan, observed:

*When working with men, silence does a better job in most cases, even if you believe what they say is wrong […] or they think you don't have anything to say!*

Salma saw herself as a successful electrical engineer as compared to many of her female fellows. While, she argued, many female engineers become frustrated in male-dominated environments and leave their jobs, she had been able to employ strategic silence for creating an empowering space for herself: "I do not argue with men because they usually want to impose

their attitudes on you […] It is better to say 'Okay' and move on. You will prove that you were right with your actions, and they will see it!"

In dealing with unfriendly environments that featured heightened practices of masculinity, denigration of women, and sexualization and gendering of their work choices, as previously discussed, these women constructed forms of femininity that relied on feminine traits of patience, modesty, and care to overturn these difficulties. For example, Neda discussed how a change in her strategy as the supervisor of a group of men granted her success in one of her projects:

*It was tough. At some point, I figured I could not order men directly and had to change my tone. For example, instead of telling them to do something I would say, "Don't you think it would be better to do it this way?" Or, "What do you think we should do?" I learned that arguing with men does not work! They resist your authority as a woman. At the end of the day, they have those patriarchal perceptions toward women in the back of their minds.*

Even in dealing with incidences of verbal harassment and abusive behaviors, women found avoiding conflict as more empowering and fruitful than fighting back directly. We must bear in mind that almost all of these women were working in organizations with no recognition of or protection against sexual misconduct, at least at the time the fieldwork was done. In almost all workplaces, women as victims of the sexual misconduct would carry the blame for such incidents, with their manners and ethics being questioned. In this context, women like Nafiseh, from Isfahan, preferred to feign ignorance and let abusive behavior or language go:

*I used to get very upset or act back aggressively. But I noticed I will lose my chances this way! Now I have learned to control my nerve and just guide the topic back to business smoothly […] It has its own politics; you need to somehow make them understand that you are not open to these relations without offending them; many women get angry and so lose their jobs.*

In the same way, Soomlaz added:

*For women, it is very important to survive in masculine environments. Many women get these jobs, but they don't survive. You need to keep calm and ignore even if people make fun of you, talk behind your back, or make rumors about you. The best way is to ignore these and mind your*

*own business. Those women who get angry and try to fight back, they won't survive and leave these jobs eventually. My dad always says in a battle, the loser is the one who loses his nerve.*

Those women who insisted on doing all sorts of site activities, even in the hazardous environments, were also relying on their individual social capital to create conditions in which they felt comfortable and safe in carrying out assigned tasks. Najmeh was one those women who did not want to miss any opportunity to learn at industrial sites. She recounted how she used to deal with unsafe environments, as an on-site engineer in her previous job:

*I really liked to work at Mojtam E Foulad and learn the new technologies and did not want to miss any opportunity there. There are tunnels there with very dangerous environments. In addition to physical hazards, the tunnels are really nice places for male workers to smoke [tobacco or other things] or secretly take a break. So it is very dangerous for a woman to inspect these tunnels by herself. There are no security cameras or guards. As an executive engineer, there were times that I had to get into those tunnels to see what was happening. What I did was to somehow make one of my male coworkers to come with me without directly, saying that I did feel safe to go by myself. I would say, "Mr. So-and-So, I do not think you have ever visited that tunnel. Let's take a look together today. It will be good for you, too." Worse-case scenario, if no engineer was available, I would take my husband, who was my coworker at the time, with me.*

Najmeh emphasized that asking directly for men's support as a woman reduces one's credibility in their eyes and one needs to be politically precise in how to ask for help. When structural adjustments for protecting individual safety, comfort, and well-being do not exist, individuals' creativity in navigating available possibilities to achieve their goals becomes crucial. Some women even described being strategic in the amount of information they released to their families regarding their working environments. Andisheh, a chemical engineer in Isfahan, for example, revealed:

*I never talked much about my working conditions at home; maybe I even pretended to be in a better condition than what I had. The second day of work in my first job, my dad came to the factory to see where his girl worked. He was shocked! I clearly remember his face when he asked, "Do you really want to work here?!" I did not show him my actual office, which was inside the manufacturing salon. I took him to the administration building in one of the accounting offices where a female accountant was working. I told him that I am here from morning to evening, sitting next to this lady. I did not want my dad to panic by knowing that I am*

*the only woman inside the manufacturing salon. I think the reason was that I did not want him to feel dishonored and say, "I do not want you to work!"*

While some scholars have argued that such individual strategies of empowerment lack the potential to make lasting changes for the collective empowerment of women (Bespinar, 2010), they are important for understanding alternative forms of empowerment that have been developed by women under different living conditions. In his book, *Life as Politics*, Bayat (2009) helps us understand how "quiet and unassuming daily struggles" in the "very zones of exclusion" in the public domain create conditions for social transformations. About women in post-revolutionary Iran, he observes that through "fragmented actions" women "push for their claims, not as deliberate acts of defiance, but as logical and natural venues to express individuality and better their life chances." These seemingly fragmented practices in Bayat's view deliver unavoidable changes for the collective good. Bayat's framework urges us to go beyond conventional accounts of change and empowerment, particularly when thinking about women in the Middle East. Those include using approaches that envision change only through institutional adjustments pressed by collective and coherent movements with strong leadership, strategic mobilization, and clear framing. In the absence of a material and discursive context for such movements to emerge and burgeon under patriarchal, authoritarian regimes, it is crucial, both analytically and politically, to pay attention to the nuances of how women empower themselves in the face of intense discrimination. What discourses do they draw on to defend their right to public participation, including work places? And what strategies do they find most realistically fruitful for overturning day-to-day struggles?

My data must be interpreted by considering the fact that the fieldwork was conducted during the time of what many inside scholars call "collective hopelessness," toward the improvement of conditions in the entire country (as discussed in Chapter 3). Owing to their

education, many of my engineering participants were in positions and on a path to leave the country on student or work visas. They were hoping to find social destinations where they could enjoy more protection for women, in addition to living under laws and regulations that release them from the pressures of employing individual strategies that were more necessary in Iran. In short, they sought destinations that promised respect and equality for women. Belonging to underprivileged backgrounds, emigration was not a realistic prospect for taxi drivers, however. These were women dealing with the harsh realities of economic survival during a time of economic recession. They did not enjoy the privilege of becoming entirely exasperated with their current status and leave the country behind; they could not afford to not invest in available possibilities for improving their life chances and maintaining their livelihoods. I devote the next chapter to delve into these women's discourses and strategies of empowerment, contextualizing their narratives within a state-promoted discourse of femininity, segregation, and difference, as I discussed in Chapter 2.

# CHAPTER 5: EMPOWERMENT FROM WITHIN

## Introduction

As I discussed in previous chapters, the state's gender politics after the revolution have been formed with particular caution against the adaptation of what is seen as Western values, including feminist conceptualizations of equality. Underneath the state's approach to gender lies the ideology of difference, based on an Islamic discourse, which assigns men and women to complementary roles in both the public and private arenas. The difference versus equality debate and the controversies arising from the state's gender politics, including segregation, constitutes the core of the struggles over ideals of femininity and womanhood. Chapter 3 depicted a broad picture of conditions facing women in the male-dominated labor market of the country, and Chapter 4 used interview data to depict a detailed picture of day-to-day challenges facing women by using the case of two gender atypical jobs: on-site engineering and taxi driving. In this chapter I will explore women's discourse and strategies of empowerment in the face of their masculinized work. Given a context in which gender equality lacks the institutional setting for enforcement, and the differences in treatment of the respective sexes, coupled with the ideology of segregation that so persistently remains at the core of the formal discourse of womanhood, how do women in gender-atypical jobs manage to overturn discriminatory practices on a day-to-day basis?

Chapter 4 ended with a brief discussion of engineers' discourses of and strategies for empowerment. This chapter focuses on the same issue by drawing on experiences and narratives of taxi drivers. I devote one complete chapter to taxi drivers because the job has such interesting characteristics, ones which provide us with a unique opportunity to understand women's

discourse of empowerment in the context of post-revolutionary Iran. Women's access to taxi driving was justified through the state-promoted discourse of difference and segregation, which are understood as the most important manifestations of state-based patriarchy. The segregation ideology in the case of taxis facilitated occupational desegregation, causing women to experience segregation in paradoxical ways. Through their labor, these women create segregated spaces that promise safety and comfort to other women. They drive their green taxis on urban streets as an alternative form of public transportation for mixed-gender taxis and public buses, reinforcing, intentionally or unintentionally, the legitimacy of the segregation ideology as a response to women's needs in the public space. At the same time, they step into the masculine domain of taxi-driving, undermining the gender division in the labor market and its underlying value system, which discourages women from working in male sectors in general. How is this non-traditional occupational opportunity, created on the basis of the state's discourse of segregation and difference, navigated by women? How do these women empower themselves in the face of challenges discussed in the previous chapter? In what ways do women's discourses and strategies of empowerment intersect with discourses of difference and segregation, as manifested in the post-revolutionary context?

## Segregation and Women's Empowerment in Iran' Context

In her analysis of segregation in post-revolutionary Iran, Shahrokini (2014) argues that segregation should not be reduced to a tool used by the state for eradicating women's participation in public life. Segregation, for years after the revolution, she argues, has gone beyond a top-down imposition of an Islamic order and has instead served as a venue for producing modes of womanhood that better fit the state's ideology. She conceptualizes

segregation as a manifestation of state's productive mode of governmentality (Foucault, 1982) for channeling women's public life into its desired forms through "a discourse that permeates both the state and society" and justifies segregation as response to women's needs and their right to public mobility. Drawing on difference ideology and the idea that women have gender-specific needs that require particular accommodations, the state has continued its projects of segregation to the present. Segregation is framed as a right rather than an obligation for Islamization within the state's overarching discourse, and as a right it cannot and will not be taken away from women.

On the ground and in the day-to-day life of women, though, segregation has been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has religious and cultural roots that have remained intact regardless of the political environment. The best example is Reza Shah's failure to force religious women to remove their hejab during his time in office. There is a large body of research on Muslim women who live in Western countries and yet practice hejab as an important part of their identity (Burke, 2012; Rinaldo, 2014; Mahmood, 2009; Avishai, 2008). Muslim women cover their hair and parts of their bodies in front of non-related (*namahram*) men and expectedly, in many occasions, feel more comfortable in women-only spaces. In many ways segregation creates culturally integrative spaces that respond to the very organic needs and demands of women. For example, women-only hair salons, recreational or health centers, and segregation within mosques or hospitals are appreciated by many women, even the non-religious, in Iran.

On the other hand, segregation has served as a ground for conservative political trends meant to deny women's access to certain sites such as sport stadiums or opportunities in the job market. Rather than a possibility based on a shared system of values in a Durkheimian sense, the conservative political implications of segregation lead to explicit discrimination against women,

leading to resistance among groups of women and progressive institutions within the state itself. Segregation, therefore, cannot be homogenized to become a coherent institution with clearly defined positive or negative outputs. In some instances, it serves as a burden and in others as an accommodation to women's mobility. To reduce it to one of these tells us little about its nuances with respect to the state and women. The former overlooks its cultural aspects, and the latter its political implications. Complexities aside however, segregation provides a unique structural setting to which women respond in unique ways, as I intend to demonstrate in this chapter. Women's agency in giving meaning to segregation as a culturally integrative accommodation, or challenging it as a politicized tool for subordinating women, urge us to extend the theoretical approaches to segregation beyond the dichotomies of burden versus accommodation, or, in a more simple sense, bad versus good.

I draw on 41 interviews with female taxi drivers in Esfahan and Tehran, in addition to my systematic observations from their working conditions while riding their taxis, to address the questions raised in this chapter. My analysis sheds light on the unique ways these women appropriate segregation as a culturally defined and institutionally enforced possibility to turn the conservative implications of segregation on their head and undermine the discriminative implications of difference ideology. The narratives of female taxi drivers show how cultural ideals of women's empowerment are produced and how the discursive formations of difference, equality, and segregation are represented in these accounts. While difference and equality are constructed as counterparts within the state's gender discourse, and segregation has gained legitimacy as a response to women's specific needs and rights in the public space, my findings in this chapter show how women creatively borrow from difference, equality, and segregation ideologies to cultivate their own discourse of empowerment.

In what follows, I first contextualize the emergence of women-only taxis in Iran and its embedded complexities. I then conceptualize women-only taxis as a resource made available to women through the very ideology of segregation—a resource previously exclusive to men. In the ensuing sections I will discuss how women give meaning to their segregated taxis as venues for women's empowerment, and how their ability to transgress gender boundaries in the labor market eventually undermines the very ideology of segregation. I will, in particular, discuss how the ideas of difference and equality are integrated into women's understanding of segregation, and how working in a masculine job, ironically, serves as a site for accentuating a construction of femininity that is heavily centered on women's family roles, especially motherhood.

### Women-Only Taxis and Paradoxes of Segregation

In 2006 the Women-Only Taxi Service, a private sector company, was established for the first time in Tehran, and later expanded to other major cities. The idea was to create taxis for women, driven by women. The vastly publicized anecdotes about male drivers who had kidnapped their female riders in large cities provided a legitimate rational for creating women-only taxis. From its inception,  revolutionary discourse promised to protect women's safety and dignity in public spaces through the enforcement of hejab and segregation, and prevent what was seen as the over-sexualization of women's bodies in the West and under Pahlavi's regime. With high rates of sexual assault and harassment in mixed-gender taxis, and even on public buses where women and men are segregated into front and back sections, women-only taxis would not only appeal to the needs of women but also well fit the state's approach to women's public presence.

The threats of sexual harassment and assault are common struggles facing women globally and there have been a plethora of initiatives put forward in different countries, both developing and developed, for making the public sphere a safer domain for women. Municipalities, governments, police departments, NGOs, private businesses, and a handful of other organizations have been involved in advancing programs for reducing threats of harassment. Segregation of spaces, however, may not be viewed as a suitable solution everywhere. When Uber aimed to launch its "Uber for women" initiative in 2017 in the U.S. as an option offered to its female drivers who were concerned about their safety, it raised controversies about the legality of a business model that denies service to a part of the population, namely, men. Safr, another ride-sharing app recently launched in Boston, only encompasses female drivers, but provides service to both men and women. In Iran, however, the idea fit well into how public space was constructed after the revolution and there were no constitutional, legal, political, or socio-cultural burdens for creating segregated taxis for women. Actually many spaces were segregated after the revolution, so why not having women-only taxis? Iran was among the first countries to implement the idea of women driving women, with many other countries, including India, Mexico, Lebanon, and UAE to follow.

The start-up in Tehran framed its service as a response to women's need to have a safe means of public transport, as well as their right to have mobility in the public space in the same way that other segregated spaces were framed (Shahrokni, 2014). In his speech on the opening day of the first women-only taxi service, the CEO of the transportation and traffic office stated:

*Women make (up) 50% of the population of our city and we need to pay special attention to their rights and needs in different regards (Seyed Jafar Hashemi, 2006).*

Recruitment ads were sent out in daily papers, inviting women to become drivers of women-only taxis. As of 2015, when my fieldwork was conducted, some 2000 women were

recruited in Tehran. In the following years, the model was expanded to other cities, including Esfahan, Mashhad, and Shiraz. In Esfahan, the second site of this fieldwork, 120 women were registered as drivers at the time of the research.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to evaluate the success of these companies. In Tehran, women were more satisfied with their incomes than were women in Isfahan, although women in Tehran also believed that their market was deteriorating. Shortly before the fieldwork, drivers in Tehran were transferred into a mixed-gender taxi firm. The original women-only company had announced bankruptcy, and women were uncertain about how the new firm would regulate their services. I visited the new host company once and talked briefly with a number of their representatives about female drivers. While there were no new regulations stipulated by the company for female drivers at the time of interviews, they mentioned that female drivers were bounded by the same laws as they were in the women-only taxi firm. Drivers, in contrast, reported driving male and female passengers. During the fieldwork I saw a number of these taxis with solo male passengers. After the fieldwork, two mobile-based ride-sharing applications developed a successful market by providing cheaper alternatives to traditional taxis. In 2017, in Tehran, one of these companies launched its female ride-share app and recruited female drivers for giving service to women and families. This surely has impacted the market for women-only taxis, and follow-up research should be done to explore how drivers of the original women-only taxis have been affected by these changes.

One important difference between women-only taxis with other segregated spaces is the fact that this job requires women to step into the masculine domain of taxi-driving. Rather than diminishing women's public visibility by channeling their activities into closed spaces — as in the case of segregated parks, swimming pools, hair salons, recreational centers, etc. — they

facilitate women’s presence at the heart of urban streets and in a non-traditional and destabilizing form. The segregation ideology facilitates occupational desegregation in a context in which the labor market is highly male-dominated and women are systematically discouraged participating in male sectors.

Women-only taxis, therefore, can be viewed as paradoxical spaces that simultaneously host segregation and desegregation. While they are created in accordance with the state-promoted project of spatial segregation, this has inevitable consequences for how public space, as a social and gendered domain (Massey, 1994), is constructed and the ways in which women’s position in the public arena is imagined. When women demonstrate their ability to take on a historically masculine job, they demonstrate their power in overturning patriarchal structures of the labor market and debunk the very rhetoric of gender differences that justify gender segregation in the first place. To drive a taxi simply means to be constantly in a public space, and to come out of the domestic sphere—not remain in the closed sphere of an office, classroom, or hospital, but into the heart of urban streets while occupying spots in public space that were traditionally exclusive to men.

The current literature on women’s public life in post-revolutionary Iran creates a binary between Iranian women as either beneficiaries or destabilizers of gender segregation. Some scholars have studied cases in which women are consumers of gender segregation (e.g. those who enjoy segregated green parks for leisure or sell their products in women-only sectors of mosques, subways, and buses) (Bahramitash, 2013; Shahrokni, 2014). Others have focused on women who challenge segregation in more radical ways by, for example, secretly entering sport stadiums or playing sports in public places. Such binaries often intertwine with issues of socioeconomic class and religiosity. Upper-Middle and secular women are often depicted as

destabilizers and lower-class, or, religious, as supporters and beneficiaries of gender segregation. My analysis in this chapter complicates this binary. Women-only taxis are paradoxical spaces in which segregation and de-segregation occur simultaneously and, therefore, drivers of these taxis simultaneously benefit from and destabilize segregation.

This has important implications for the ways in which women's public life in post-revolutionary Iran is understood in the academic literature. The liberal rhetoric of gender equality and women's rights condemn gender segregation of all types as a sign of discrimination against women. Post-colonial feminist approaches urge scholars to pay attention to cultural specificities of non-Western contexts when evaluating women's conditions. Many scholars have shed light on the empowering implications of segregation for Muslim women (Shahrokni, 2014; Bahramitash, 2013; Povery, 2015). The experiences of drivers of women-only taxis, however, shows that far from feeding into an empowering/disempowering dichotomy, gender segregation can serve as a mechanism to destabilize its own legitimacy in women's eyes while, at the same time, benefiting them in unique ways.

While gender-segregation has been at the center of the state's approach to women's public life and the technology of subject-making after the revolution (Moallem, 2005; Shahrokni, 2014), my analysis shows that women do not simply accept or reject it as a religion-based ideology or structural restriction. They instead incorporate segregation as a cultural and structural possibility as a part of their efforts to expand their public presence and livelihood. Segregation lays out particular conditions, containing both opportunities and limitations, for women to experience and navigate the public space. In the case of women-only taxis, my analysis shows that segregation transforms how women imagine their position in the labor market and bestows upon them a sense of entitlement in order to question occupational

segregation. The narratives of women presented in this chapter demonstrate how the state-promoted discourse of femininity and the tensions it has raised between the ideas of gender difference and equality are represented in women's day-to-day experiences. These narratives also show how they have adopted different elements of difference, segregation, and equality to carve out empowering spaces in the public and within a traditionally masculine job.

### Segregated Taxis, Unique Resources for Women in a Tight Labor Market

As discussed in Chapter 3, the issue of unemployment in Iran is one of the most serious concerns of the government. The unemployment rate in 2016 was reported to be as high as 12.7% . In the same year, 10% of the employed population worked in insufficient, part-time jobs that failed to meet the minimum living costs. The labor force participation rate has also been low in the decades since the revolution, with a rate of 39.4% in 2016. In 2005, more than 70% of Iranians believed that economic growth must be the first priority of the government according to the last released data on Iran (Statistical center of Iran). These economic concerns have been at the center of the state's attention, and post-revolutionary governments have failed to stabilize the labor market. For the second year in a row, the supreme leader named the year as the year of economic resistance, with a particular focus on production and employment opportunities in 2017. In the most recent presidential election debates, in 2017, the high rate of unemployment and job creation was the main venue through which candidates could mobilize voters. An expansive round of street protests emerged in the final days of 2017, as I was writing this dissertation, in protest of the government's inability to address issues of inflation and the high price of food, housing, and fuel, and unemployment.

When it comes to women's employment, breadwinners and the poor are the most recognized groups of women in policymaking (Shaditalab & Nakhaei, 2015). In the six developmental prospects that were developed over the course of four decades after the revolution, the issue of women's employment is only recognized as a priority for the poor and heads of households, with a particular emphasis on home-based jobs. In 2015, 12.5% of the households were headed by female. Eighty-four percent of female breadwinners were unemployed, 75% had no education or less than high school diploma, and only 46% were supported by charitable organizations and foundations. The percentage of the families headed by females have been constantly increasing during the last five decades, based on the available data from the Statistical Center of Iran. Based on the last census, conducted in 2017, in Urban Isfahan (a province of Isfahan) 12.3% of the households were headed by females, and in urban Tehran, 14.1%. The increasing rate of divorce and the subsequent increase in female-headed households has been among the state's chief concerns. Between 1996 and 2006, the percentage of divorced women among female breadwinners rose from 34.5% to 42.3% (Shaditalab and Nakhaei, 2015). Between 1995 and 2015, the divorce rate increased by 74%. In 2015, 9,672 divorces were recorded in Urban Isfahan and 30,385 in urban Tehran. Country-wide, the overall rate of marriage has been decreasing since 2011 while the divorce rate has increased.

The idea of allowing women into the business of taxi-driving could potentially face resistance from the conservative segments of the state, both religious leaders and conservative men. However, the specific attention paid to the economic needs of female-headed households within the formal discourse of the state provided a source of legitimacy for allowing women to participate. Thus the founders framed women-only taxis as a means of creating employment for

women in financial need, especially those who became breadwinners. In the case of Isfahan, one of the drivers, Azar, noted:

*There was resistance among the religious community of the city, especially the Friday prayer Imam. But eventually two war veterans were able to start the company because of their religious and [revolutionary] reputation. [They assured the religious community that their intention is to benefit those women who really need jobs to provide for their families].*

In both Isfahan and Tehran, the majority of drivers whom I interviewed were asked to provide evidence of being the primary breadwinner, such as divorce documentations or medical records of disabled husbands. As Shaditalab and Nakhaei (2015) argue, all the public policies and social security programs available to these women are embedded in broader projects for poverty reduction and enforce these women to adopt the label of "*zanan e bi sarparast" (*women with no guardian) to access social security. The Khomeini Relief Foundation, the main state-run charitable organization, which as of 2012 provided aid to some 1.5 million female-headed households, allocated specific loans for these women to finance taxis. Table 7 provides some statistical information about the marital and poverty status of female breadwinners in urban areas in 2011:

Table 7: Marital status of female breadwinners in urban areas, 2015 (Shaditalab and Nakhaei, 2015)

| Marital Status | Percent of female bread winners | Percent in Poverty |
|---|---|---|
| Married | 12.3 | 38 |
| Widowed | 70.7 | 23.7 |
| Divorced | 11.7 | 35.3 |
| Never Married | 5.6 | 13.3 |

Taxi driving is globally a suitable source of income for vulnerable and low-skill groups, especially in large cities where the demand for public transport is high. In Iran, taxis are an important part of public transportation. In addition to official rotating taxis, which are registered within the cities' taxi-driving sphere, there are many regular-commercial cars rotating on the streets and picking up passengers. During my fieldwork I engaged in informal conversations with male drivers of official and unofficial taxis as I was navigating the two cities. A considerable number of them were prior laborers, technicians, or factory workers who had been laid off during Ahmadi Nejad's presidency. Due to the impact of international economic sanctions on industries, without this job their families could not survive economically.

Taxi comes with a day-to-day-based income and can be a great job for those in immediate need. It also does not require advanced educational background or high-grade skills. Women-only taxis, as my participants discussed, opened a door for many women in need to prevent their families from suffering economic collapse. As Malmal, a divorced woman with four children in Tehran stated:

*How would I have been able to afford my and my children's life if the Khomeini Relief Foundation had not given us these loans for taxis? Four children, rent, utilities? I would have had to send them to their [drug addicted] dad who would have spread them among his relatives.*

Belgheis, a mother of two children, and divorced said:

*I used to be a dentistry assistant but quit my job to take care of my sick mom. My older brother used to pay me for that. But he passed away and our economic condition became tough. I contacted the Khomeini Relief Foundation to see if they provide loans for women in my condition. They said that loans are available for taxis and this is how I got to know this job and started it.*

Women with no work experience are at risk of becoming financially dependent on other family members such as parents or siblings, should they experience a divorce or the death of a husband. This makes those from low-income households more vulnerable because family

members are less likely to be able to support them after such an occurrence. As Ameneh, a divorced woman and mother of two children said:

*Everyone has his/her own issues. Maybe your brother or father helps you for a while but then they expect you to find another way because they cannot afford to do it forever.*

About the same issue, Sormeh from Isfahan stated:

S*ome of our colleagues had drug-addicted husbands and could not do anything to take control over their lives. But with these taxis they were empowered to [get a divorce].*

For many of these women, taxi-driving served as not only an income resource but also a way to maintain their personal honor. Soodabeh, in her 50s, and a single mom of three children, had started this job five years after her divorce; she was managing her own and her children's lives:

*[With this job] we were able to pull our own weight without having to beg others for help. Those times that we did not even have a penny in our pockets, we were able to hop into our taxis, drive around, pick up some riders and earn some cash.*

Soraya, whose husband had passed away and had one daughter who had graduated from college, remarked:

*When my husband passed away, I was helpless. He was not insured and [did not leave me anything else]. With this job I was able to run my life by myself. This really improved my status in my family and I felt very successful.*

For Sedigheh, a woman from Tehran and the breadwinner for two children, the job was economically and socially enabling, providing her with a condition to get a divorce:

*I was married for 19 years and my husband worked no more than a sum of 8 years during our marriage. When I saw women-only taxis on streets I immediately went after the paperwork and got my taxi. Now I am [divorced], paying my daughter's college tuition by myself and was able to buy a house after three years with this job.*

Married women benefited from women-only taxis to handle the unexpected conditions facing their families. Sima, a mother of two children had been able to support her family with

this job after her husband, a merchant in Persian carpet industry, went bankrupt after new round of international economic sanctions were imposed against Iran in 2006:

*My husband had a good business and we were wealthy. But the export of carpets stopped and he went out of business. We had two young kids at home and I had to do something. I saw the ad for these taxis on the paper in 2007 and showed to my husband and he said it is a good job because you only deal with women. I have been supporting my family ever since.*

Azar, a former housewife, married, and the mother of two children, recalled:

*My husband was injured in an accident and could not work as much as he used to. To help him and to maintain our family life, I had to work. First, I did not think I would survive in this job but since it enabled me to bring home some money, I stayed.*

Similar to Azar, Aghdas, a former math teacher and the mother of one daughter, had become a taxi driver after her husband was unemployed due to health problems:

*I developed a sort of lung allergy to chuck dust. My husband [a laborer], told me to quit and that he would provide for all of us. His income was in fact enough but then he got cancer and could not work as much as he used to. He was a contract worker and their factory laid him off. So I had to work again.*

Even for those who enjoyed more family support or had additional sources of income, the job served as a great resource for improving their social status and maintaining their livelihoods. Parisa who was divorced and the mother of one son, stated:

*My siblings are all rich and could support me, but I wanted to pull my own weight. I was enjoying the fact that I am the one who is putting food on the table [for myself and my son]; that I do not have to reach others for help. This gave meaning to my life.*

Faezeh a van driver in Esfahan, widowed, and the mother of three sons, had started this job after the unexpected death of his youngest son to maintain a social life:

*I receive my husband's retirement and it is good amount of money. We are also wealthy from my dad's side. But I wanted to somehow scape loneliness […] I spend half of my income on charity purposes. My children also get benefit from my work. I have been able to support them further. I paid to build a warehouse for my son, bought him a house and car and a car for my daughter.*

Considering the high rate of female unemployment, and a lack of competitive educational and work backgrounds among these women, the alternative for many of them was the service

sector; an entry-level administration position; or informal, home-based jobs. Taxi-driving came with many advantages compared to the other alternative jobs, as participants in my research discussed. Zahra, married and the mother of two children, compared taxi driving with her previous job in the garment industry:

*Before this I was working in a garment factory, but I did not like to work for someone else. I wanted to be free to work for myself […] In terms of income, this is a much better job than the garment industry or sewing, or jobs like that.*

Sima preferred taxi driving to her previous home-based job for two reasons:

*I used to take sewing orders for a while and work from home, but did not really like it. The income was not that good. But this job has a good income and it is more fun; you get out of the house, you are more in the society and get to know people.*

Carpet weaving in Iran has historically been heavily dependent on a female workforce. The market for the handwoven carpet industry began shrinking after the revolution and the deterioration of political and economic relations with the United States, the main market for Persian carpets. Competitiveness in the global market, and the production of machine-made carpets at lower prices also declined the share of carpet in non-oil exports: from 44.2% in 1994, to 4.4% in 2005. The deterioration of the carpet market disproportionately impacted rural and working class women for whom carpet weaving was the main source of income (Karimi, 2011; Velayati, 2011). A number of my participants were previously carpet weavers who had not been able to handle their lives with the low income associated with that line of work. Samaneh from Isfahan, divorced, and the mother of two children, was one of those women:

*I was a carpet weaver before but could not continue. Considering the inflation, and high costs of day-to-day life, I figured I have to find another job […] the income of carpet weaving was very low compared to this and I could not run our life with that.*

In addition to being a better a source of income compared to other alternatives, taxi driving turned out to be a good fit for women's living conditions despite its masculine

construction. As Laleh, a single mother of two children remarked: “This is a good job for women because we have full control over our work hours; we can both work and do the household chores.*”* In a similar way, Yasi preferred taxi driving to her previous office-based job:

*[This job] better fitted my conditions because when I was an employee [in a company] and my kid was sick, I could not easily take time off and go home. I did not belong to my children, while they were the reason I was working in the first place.*

Women-only taxis also constituted safe and friendly spaces for drivers to merge their motherhood and career responsibilities. For example, Shokooh, whose husband was permanently injured in a workplace accident, had to start this job soon after giving birth to her only child:

*When l learned about this job, I felt God really loves us because she had opened this door to us under that troubling condition. I had a newborn and I could not take her with me to [office-based] jobs. With this job, I could do this. Many of my riders knew me and would let me to pull over for a couple of minutes and breast feed my baby.*

Shokooh was able to adopt her work into her daughter’s needs as she grew up:

*For a couple of years, I only gave service to school kids because my daughter was with me and I wanted her to be around kids in her age range [rather than random riders] […] Many of them were older than my daughter; when I did not have time to help her with her homework, I would ask those kids to tutor her during the ride and they would do it as she was their sister. We all felt like a family.*

Like Shokooh, Yasi found taxi-driving suitable for her children’s needs:

*The fact that I was earning some good cash and becoming independent while having a car for myself made it enjoyable for me. I had two daughters and I could take them to schools and other classes with my taxi without having to pay for school buses.*

Participants also viewed women-only taxis as more secure working environments than many other workplaces as regards issues of discrimination and harassment, although as I discussed in the previous chapter, women were not safe from these incidents while on the streets. Sexual harassment is one of the most prominent difficulties facing women in different occupational positions. The country’s labor laws do not provide protection against sexual harassment, and in most cases, organizational policies do not recognize it as an institutional

issue. One of the reasons many women leave their jobs, as my fieldwork as a whole revealed, are incidences of harassment conducted by managers, supervisors, or other co-workers.

The majority of taxi drivers expressed relative satisfaction with the safety and autonomy they could enjoy inside the space of their taxis. As some of them mentioned, they felt as though they were their "own laborers and bosses." When I asked Azar, if an office-based job would not be a better suit for her conditions as a woman, she responded:

*The labor market in our country is not very promising so I did not have a high chance to find an office-based job [in public sector]. Plus I did not feel safe to work for a private company. [This job has a better condition because] all of my passengers are women so I prefer to keep this job.*

Mina, another driver from Isfahan, married to an unemployed man, and the mother of two children, recited her job search experiences before becoming a driver:

*I was looking for jobs for a couple of months, but all the places I went for an interview for secretary positions, the manager expected other [sexual] services, too! One of them directly told me, "Do you see that room over there? You need to come with me to that room once in a while!" All I could do was to leave and cry on my way back. With this job, I was at least safe from these issues.*

To sum up, as new job opportunities women-only taxis opened windows to many women who otherwise would have been challenged to deal with situations facing them and their families. These women were afforded food, housing, and clothing of their families, education of their children, medical expenses of their disabled spouses, and many other living costs by working on their taxis from morning to evening. Besides fulfilling their financial needs, many of them enjoyed the public mobility that came with this job and their ability to break gender stereotypes that undermine women's driving skills. They further viewed their work as serving the needs of other women by providing a safe means of public transport for them. At the same time, as discussed in the previous chapter, the job came with intense challenges caused by masculine constructions of taxi driving and public space. In the next sections I will delve into the

experiences and narratives of these women to address the main questions of this chapter. That is, what are the features and elements of these women's discourse of empowerment? And in what ways does this discourse intersect with the post-revolutionary discourse of womanhood and its emphasis on ideologies of difference and segregation? I will discuss how these women creatively borrow from these ideologies of difference and segregation, in addition to their imbedded focus on women's motherhood and family roles, to ironically highlight the necessity of letting women into not only taxi driving, but also other exclusively masculine domains.

### Driving Taxis, Producing Segregation, Doing Difference

*Many women were happy with women-only taxis. The majority of them belonged to religious neighborhoods. They were our loyal customers. I had some riders who told me their husbands would not allow them go anywhere with public transport but now they are happy to have us. [Sima from Tehran]*

*I have many riders who thank me for doing this job so they have peace of mind [...] Just the other day, I had a passenger who told me thank God that we have female drivers in the city. My husband does not allow me to ride with male taxi drivers to return home from a beauty salon. Because they stare at you or try to flirt with you. [Belgheis from Isfahan]*

While from a secular-liberal perspective, statements like these are read as patriarchal bargains (Kandioti, 1988) and women's internalization of patriarchal values (Bespinar, 2010), my analysis shows how drivers of women-only taxis turn these values on their head by cultivating them toward empowering ends for themselves and other women as well. As scholars such as Mohanty, Mahmood, Bahramitash, have long argued, women's agency can be manifested in different forms depending on the specifics of their social context. Women's "modalities of agency" extend beyond the so-called emancipatory practices that explicitly fight against whatever is perceived as incidences of patriarchy, including segregation and essentialism (Mahmood, 2005; Mohanty, 1988; Rinaldo, 2014). For drivers of women-only taxis, working for

segregated taxi firms did not mean feeding the ideology of segregation as a patriarchal structure. They instead viewed their job as enabling for other women and a way to facilitate their public mobility and livelihoods. These views among women were informed by a discourse of difference, one that conceptualizes men as essentially different from women (Lewis, 2013) and thus insufficient to serve them in the public domain. Shohreh, a woman from Isfahan, asserted:

*Our job is very beneficial to the society. Imagine you as a woman are heading to a party, with make-up and dress. If you ride with a male driver you won't feel comfortable because he might ogle you or say something inappropriate. But with me, you feel much safer because I am a woman like you. I warrant your safety […].*

Along a similar line, Badri from Tehran stated:

*Many women welcomed our service when we started. Religious women were more comfortable with us. Non-religious ones also were more comfortable with us to ride back from beauty salons, or those who had to breast feed.*

Drawing on a discourse that justifies segregation as a way to avoid unwanted disturbances from men in the public space, participants viewed their taxis as a necessary service for women. Mixed-gender taxis were depicted as spaces with risks of assault for participants and for many other women whom I spoke to during the course of my fieldwork. As Mahvash, from Isfahan, recounted:

*Before becoming a taxi driver myself, I did not feel comfortable with male taxi drivers because they look for excuses to start mingling with you or staring at you from the mirror. But now sometimes I have riders who breastfeed their kids in my car and pray for me for doing this job.*

Participants also viewed their job as particularly beneficial to families with young daughters. I rode with Azar in Isfahan to pick up a girl from summer school and drive her home. She was a high school girl wearing Chador. On the way back, Azar said:

*When I feel [women-only taxis] give families the peace of mind to let their young daughters use taxis, I become inspired to continue. I have a teenage girl myself and this gives me great joy that I can provide safety for girls of other families. I thank God that families trust us. I, as a mother, have this peace of mind that if I sell my taxi one day, we have women-only taxis in the city that my daughter can use.*

Women further commented on how their female riders appreciate the feminized environment of their taxis as opposed to the mixed gender ones. Not only were male drivers depicted as a threat to women's safety, the mixed-gender taxis were seen as masculine domains, not friendly to women's needs and tastes. For example, Zahra, from Isfahan, stated:

*I get my energy from my passengers and the fact that they sit in my taxi and give me complements on my driving skills, navigation, and the cleanness of my car. They say when we ride with male drivers, their cars smell like cigarette smoke, or they drive recklessly […]*

Zahra's comment here shows how the difference ideology and a belief in inherent differences between men and women can feed women's discourse of entitlement to the job. This emphasis on differentiating women-only taxis from the regular taxis led to a sense of responsibility among participants for making a social impact on improving the public image of women-only taxis and women's status in the public space. About her motivation to remain in this job despite its difficulties, Somayeh, a retired high school teacher who wore Chador, was one of the drivers in Isfahan. She stated:

*The fact that I can do something and make an impact on the society keeps me motivated […] I always keep my car clean and treat my riders with respect. I think these behaviors remain in my riders' minds and make a good reputation for women-only taxis.*

Azar, from Isfahan, particularly emphasized the importance of following decent and pious dress code, to present taxi driving as a good fit for women and challenge those accounts that view taxi driving as a threat to women's social status, honor, and decency:

*When I am driving [this green] taxi, I am responsible to follow some rules. For example, I need to follow the [standard dress code] to send this message to men and people that us, women, can do anything while protecting our dignity and decency.*

The statements from the participants so far signal the fact that they viewed their segregated taxis as venues of empowerment, not just for themselves but for other women as well. This challenges liberal approaches to segregation, which view it as a burden to equality and

empowerment. It further highlights women's agency in giving empowering meaning to their taxis through narratives that depict their labor as a necessity for women's safe mobility in the public space.

## Driving Taxis, Negotiating Motherhood

Motherhood was also central to the way these women made sense of what they did. Being a taxi driver is certainly not an easy job. In large cities like Isfahan and Terhan, traffic is heavy, air pollution is intense, and driving full-time, especially with manual transmission cars, is physically demanding. In addition to these factors, my fieldwork provides in-depth information on discrimination facing these women as they drive their taxis on urban streets. In navigating the masculine constructions of the public space and a masculine job such as taxi driving, the notion and status of motherhood was an essential resource for these women to speak out against discrimination and to lament the lack of better institutional support for women. Here what Azar says about police officers' double standards with female drivers, as one example of how motherhood is essential to the way these women understand their jobs and give meaning to their decisions to undertake an otherwise masculine profession.

*A while ago, when a couple of my co-workers were waiting to be called on, a police officer reached and accused them in a very brutal way for making that street corner their "hangout." This is very interesting, isn't it?! We are out on the streets to work, and this country's police officer says we are just 'hanging out'.*

In this sense, the feminine role of motherhood, as a valorized status within the state's overarching gender discourse, and, ironically, a justification for occupational segregation, provides women with a language to express a sense of entitlement to masculine domains.

In Isfahan, I was allowed to sit in a group meeting between drivers and the managers of their company. The meeting was on a Friday[5] morning in a building located in a green park. I arrived early and saw a group of drivers having breakfast outside the building while discussing what topics they should raise in this meeting, and which of their issues to emphasize. As a number of drivers told me later, the company had been sending periodic announcements about the meeting to encourage a high participation rate; all drivers expected the meeting to be a chance to voice their problems and ask for solutions. Surprisingly though, the opening address turn out to be an advertisement speech given by a male representative of a tire company. Another male speaker was invited to give women some business advice on how to improve their markets. He started with examples of memos written by a successful taxi driver in New York City, who had managed to secure loyal, regular passengers. He moved on to say how a clean, perfumed taxi with a well-dressed driver who offers beverages and light snacks to the passengers, provides books and magazines for them to use during their time in his taxi, and is well-versed in how to engage in conversations with passengers can make a profitable business out of taxi-driving. His entire speech was to encourage women to devote more effort to improve the quality of their service, thereby removing the responsibility from their company to provide a better-quality infrastructure such as updated GPS, communication devices, and stop signs. After a while, one of the drivers raised her hand and said:

*Excuse me sir! What you are saying is very interesting, but we thought the meeting will be for us to talk about our problems. It is Friday noon, my children are at home, my food is on the stove now, and I have so many other things to do! When do we get to talk about our problems?*

Following her, other drivers started objecting to the way the meeting was planned, and asked their manager to let them talk about their issues. Eventually the speaker left and the

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[5] Friday is the official weekend holiday in Iran, although many of the drivers still worked.

manager started listening to the women. The majority of the women in that meeting simply could not afford the luxury of being a prestigious driver of a perfumed taxi loaded with beverages, snacks, and books. They were primary breadwinners of their families with household preoccupations, delayed mortgages, and unpaid loans. Drawing on the language of motherhood, a handful of women in the meeting said they felt entitled to interrupt the speaker and ask for a better use of meeting time. This belief in what they viewed as the essence of motherhood was also enabling, as it provided women with an alternative to missing institutional supports and resources for enforcing equal working conditions for them. Senobar, from Tehran and the single mother of two children commented:

*The job is a masculine job! But it is fine with us! We do it anyway! The problem is the discriminations they make against us. These are the things that annoy us. […] Unfortunately our society always downgrades women. Despite all of these discriminations, all of us stand courageously! I have no doubt that if conditions were the other way around, not even one man would stay in this job! But thank God we have all stood courageously just for the love of our children! Such a pity that neither our company nor the society appreciate my colleagues' efforts.*

Ashraf is a middle-aged woman, the mother of three children, and an informal taxi-driver[6]; her husband was unemployed at the time of interview due to his drug addiction. From Ashraf's perspective:

*When [women] work outside the house, [their] children and husbands still get hungry at noon. No matter how tired [they] are from work or how much pain [they] have because [they] are on a period, the food must be on the table. Only women can handle it because of the love they have in their hearts.*

When I met Ashraf she was financially devastated; her husband was unemployed due to his drug addiction, and her older daughter was getting married. In Iran's culture, the bride's parents are in charge of a dowry, which includes all home appliances and furniture. The dowry is a large

[6] Informal taxi drivers use their personal, commercial cars to take passengers, whereas formal drivers have their taxis registered.

financial burden, even to middle-class families. Despite her economic conditions, Ashraf took pride in "working her fingers to the bone" to run her family.

Motherhood was the motivation for many of taxi drivers, used to overcome the difficulties of their job. During her interview, Azar, a driver of women-/family-only taxis in Isfahan and the mother of two children, explained at great length the challenges facing female taxi drivers. She expressed frustration with inequalities between male and female taxi drivers, and the discriminatory behavior of officials, laws, and regulations. She also discussed how women's decision to become taxi drivers is viewed as lack of family honor by the public, in addition to the negative impact of such stigma on female drivers' personal lives. Despite these challenges, when asked "What motivates you to come to work every morning?" she responded:

*The positive energy for me comes from the fact that I can provide a better condition for my kids with this job; when I want to buy them something I can get a better brand, or I can put them in more extracurricular classes […] I gain energy when I see my kids are safe and happy."*

The discourse of motherhood in some cases enabled women to incorporate their own evaluation of the extent to which segregation impacted their work. The mobility that women gain with women-only taxis and the opportunities to navigate the public space on a day-to-day basis cannot be easily regulated or taken back. Being a taxi driver comes with a handful of situations in which women can take control over the extent to which they abide by the norms and regulations related to segregation. For example, while, according to the law, women were not allowed to pick up male riders (unless accompanied by women) or work as rotating taxis, a few of them mentioned doing so after their regular working hours in order to make some extra cash. Saboor recited one of her experiences with a male rider:

*It was after midnight. I stopped for a young man on the street side. He sat in the front seat without looking at me. After a while when he was handing me the ride-fee, he said, "Here, sir!" Suddenly he looked at me [and noticed I am a woman]. He apologized and asked, "Weren't you*

*scared to let me [a man]in your car [late at the night]? I said: "No my dear! Why would I be scared? Do you think you are scary? You are like my son!"*

The Islamic concept of "*mahramiat*" underlies norms of interpersonal interactions between Muslim men and women. In the case of Iran, the top-down Islamization of the public space after the revolution further reinforced the norms of *mahramiat* and criminalized physical contact, or any form of intimacy between non-related men and women (i.e. *maharems*). In this context, the language of motherhood and sisterhood plays a central role in legitimizing close human relations between men and women who believe in religious bounds of cross-gender relations and yet seek open social relations in a public space. For women such as Saboor, therefore, the discourse of motherhood and sisterhood was empowering, as it gave her a language to legitimize, culturally, choices to give service to "*namahram*" male passengers.

While the vast majority of my interviewees were drivers of women-only taxis, I came across a few women who drove mixed-gender taxis. These were women who had taken advantage of ambiguities in work laws and regulations of The Transportation Institut*e*, which do not clearly stipulate whether or not women can drive mixed-gender taxis. Zohreh, a married women in her late 40s, for example, was working for her neighborhood small taxi-service agency along with her husband, providing service to both male and female customers. When asked whether she feels comfortable having male passengers in her car, she responded:

*I see all of them as my sons and brothers. Sometimes male passengers ask me if they can sit in the front. I always say, "No problem! You are my brother!*

In this case, too, Zohreh adopts the concepts of sisterhood and motherhood into her navigation of the social arena as a female taxi driver. While motherhood and sisterhood are widely conceptualized as women's roles in private space and a double burden to those who work outside the home, women's statements in this context show how the very same concepts can be

appropriated by women to open up empowering spaces in the public arena and claim access to masculine domains. Saboor, previously mentioned, and a driver of women-only taxis in Isfahan, recalled an experience when she picked up male street-hail passengers in her private car, before being employed by the women-only taxi firm:

*It was Ramazan: my children and I were all fasting, we did not have any dates in the fridge for the Iftar, and I had no cash in my pocket! I jumped in the car, drove to the nearest crowded area and picked up four male passengers. A police officer stopped me right away. He confiscated my car registration and driver's license.*

In her visit to the police office to get her documents released, she was charged for carrying passengers by private car. This is despite the fact that carrying passengers is a typical primary or secondary job for men of lower-middle and lower-class households. Actually, these private cars (*Shakhsi*) are de-facto integrated segments of public transportation, especially in large cities like Isfahan and Tehran. It was therefore not difficult for Saboor to see how she was being penalized as a woman and to respond furiously to the police officer:

*It is Ramezan and I needed money to get some dates for my children's Iftar. I have not stolen from anyone nor done anything unethical! I just picked up and dropped off a few passengers [just like men do]!*

As Saboor said, he "was clearly touched" by her response, removed the charges, and returned her documents. The power imbedded in the discourse of motherhood appeared to defy institutional resistance against women's gender transgressions, as Saboor's example shows.

## Driving Taxis, Striving for Equality

Many scholars have argued that segregated spaces, especially in the Middle Eastern context, serve toward the empowerment of some groups of women, especially the religious, by facilitating their access to the public domain (Andrews and Shahrokni, 2014; Paidar, 1995; Bahramitash, 2013). Most of the previous analysis focused on cases in which women are

consumers of segregated spaces, such as those who enjoy women-only green parks or women who sell their products in women-only sections of mosques, buses, and trains. Drivers of women-only taxis are different in the sense that they are creators rather than consumers of segregation. Without their labor, the very idea of women-only taxis would not become materialized; through their work, these women embody and reinforce the rhetoric of spatial segregation. Women's productive role in creating segregated spaces was central to the way they understood their jobs, which gave meaning to their decisions to undertake the masculine job of taxi-driving. Zahra, one of the drivers in Esfahan, remarked: "I, for one, am proud of my job because I feel we secure the safety of women and girls in our cities."

While admitting the difficulties of the job, women pride themselves in their ability to undertake a job that was perceived as beyond women's capabilities, as Atefeh from Tehran noted:

*I feel so proud of my job, and this feeling comes from my ability to do a man's job! Male taxi drivers say to us,"Why do you do this? It is a tough job even for us men." This makes me proud as a woman!*

Avaa from Tehran, a married mother of one, stated:

*Now, in society, women are more successful than men. We wanted to show our ability to work outside the house and that we like to be active in society. Nothing is impossible and we can do everything.*

It is with these women's labor that the idea of segregated taxis is materialized; this gives them a sense of entitlement to question the discriminatory outcomes of the difference ideology that justifies segregation in the first place. It also give them the self-confidence to claim their rights to equal access to the labor market. For example, Zohreh, one of the drivers in Tehran, stated:

We*, women, must step forward and change our conditions. Some of my female riders and friends say, we are not comfortable with driving. I ask them, "What does scare you?!" Look at me! I am behind the wheels! If you think your driving is not good, it is okay, do it! But drive on the*

*margins and slowly! Don't think it is impossible! We should show men we can do whatever they do! We can drive, we can fuel the car, we can take it to auto-shop! It is not that big of a deal!*

While owing their jobs to the institutionalization of gender segregation, participants refuted beliefs that burden woman's entry into masculine sectors of the labor market. Spatial segregation provided a venue for these women to undermine segregation of labor market and claim their right to access all types of jobs. As Zahra from Esfahan asserted:

*I do not like labeling jobs as masculine and feminine. What is wrong with having women in all types of jobs? I am so sad for the fact that women cannot work as judges in our country! Or why don't they let women in police and military departments? When women have proved that they can do anything, there is no reason to limit them […] Right now, we do not have any female bus drivers in Esfahan, but if one day they give us the option I will be among those who go for it. I enjoy when I see women who do these types of jobs.*

In the same way, Zohreh argued:

*It is our society that thinks this way, but haven't you seen other countries? Women do the most rough jobs. I have seen women on TV programs who do welding. We [Iranian women] must do these types of jobs so we can prove to other women that we can do it too! Not just men.*

Segregation, as Shahrokni (2014) argues, has been a part of the "subject making" process in post-revolutionary Iran; it permeates the ways in which public spaces is produced, imagined, and consumed. In many cases the very concept of segregation and its perceived benefits for women have led participants to condemn structural burdens to women's entry into other male-dominated fields. For example, Shohreh, one of the drivers in Esfahan, argued:

*Women are entering all types of jobs nowadays. We have female firefighters, too. I think we need female drivers for ambulances for cases where patients are women. In these cases, the driver can easily help managing the emergency situation because she won't have to worry about not touching the patient or things like that.*

Women-only taxis provided women with a site to navigate and negotiate equality by expanding their networks with women of other backgrounds. Many of these women were previously stay-home wives with limited access to social networks outside the circle of their

family. This job was enabling, as it served as a venue for women to form networks with other women. Azar from Esfahan said she believes:

*With this job we become an experimental sociologist [like yourself] because we get to talk and interact with women with a whole conditions and lives, with different culture and attitudes. Many of my passengers talk to me and share their life stories. It is always very interesting to me.*

Atefeh, one of the drivers in Tehran, described the impact of these networks on her family life:

*One of the reasons for my divorce was this job! Before that, I was a stay-home wife; I knew that my husband does not put any effort for our life [and in these last years was drug addicted] but I was thinking, what can I do? We are Iranian women and have to accept these conditions. But with this job, I got to know and talk to many other women [from diverse economic classes] and that's when I noticed how irresponsible my husband is compared to many other men.*

Sima, another driver in Tehran, said she believes that the job had transformed her socially:

*I used to be a shy person, I could not speak up and make my voice heard. But this job has changed me. I am more bold now and I can talk with men; I can defend my rights. When I was at home the whole day I did not know any of these.*

As Bayat (2009) argues, women's public presence in years after the revolution established the core of their success in overturning patriarchal domination over their lives. Without the freedom to form a collective movement for pressing for equality, women managed to assert their rights to access the public space for work, education, and entertainment through what he calls the "art of presence." Public presence gave drivers of women-only taxis the self-confidence, social skills, and knowledge to undermine traditional gender ideologies that limit women to the domestic sphere. Many found themselves more capable than men as they managed to reconcile the masculine job of taxi driving with their household responsibilities. Faezeh, a van driver in Isfahan, for example, stated:

*Iranians believe work is for men. But I say work is for any healthy human being. I, for one, believe that a woman should be strong and do not rely on her man. She should be able to take care of herself. At the same time she should be delicate, be a good mother for her kids, a good housekeeper, I have been successful in all of these.*

On a similar note, Malmal said:

*Men just carry the title of being "men". Women are more strong. When they come home from work, men lay back in front of the T.V. expecting their wives to serve them; bring tea, fruits, food. But thanks God women are able to take care of the household and be active in the society.*

While the ideal model of Muslim women as put forward by conservative segments of the state in Iran associated the divine essence of womanhood with their family roles, participants found this essence in their ability to merge work with family. As Belgheis from Isfahan stated:

*Women can do men's jobs, but men cannot easily do women's. I myself have been a taxi driver for four years now. During these years I have also been a mother and a father to my daughters, and a nurse for my sick mom. At the same time I worked on my taxi and managed my life. No man can handle all these things together.*

By transgressing boundaries into a hyper masculine domain and gaining visibility in the public space as taxi drivers, these women viewed themselves as pioneers for opening up space for other women. Soodabeh, one of the first-generation drivers of women-only taxis, remarked:

*We stepped into this field because of our economic needs. However, it was us who opened this way for other women. We set the ground for this job, but it also made us stronger as individuals.*

When asked if cultural acceptance for female taxi drivers has improved, Azar responded:

*We need to work on our culture. I, as a mother, must give my kid enough awareness before he/she gets into the society. I should tell him/her that there is no difference between men and women and in many cases, women are better. I, as a mother, should teach my kid to respect to women's/girls' rights. There is much room for improvement in our society.*

## Closing Remarks

In this chapter I explored the work experiences and attitudes of drivers of women-only taxis in Iran. This group of women have unsettled the norms of both labor market and the public space by driving their women-only taxis on the streets of Isfahan and Tehran, a job that is made available to them through the very institution of gender segregation. My goal was to understand how these women, as simultaneously beneficiaries and destabilizers of segregation, respond to

segregation as a structure and ideology and how various approaches to or ideas about difference and equality are represented in their discourse of empowerment. As my analysis in this chapter has shown, gender segregation can lead to destabilization of its own roots by creating a condition for social transformation among women. This condition emerges as women creatively appropriate opportunities created for them through the process of segregation to disprove traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities.

My participants creatively appropriated the ideology of difference, centered on women's family roles but especially in the realm of motherhood, to claim equal access to the most inaccessible sectors of labor market. This is crucial, as within the predominant gender politics of the state, family roles justify women's underrepresentation in the labor market and systematic limitations on their access to work and public mobility. Women want to become taxi drivers, bus drivers, judges, fire fighters, etc., because they believe that, in spite of men's opinions or disapproval, they can handle family and work. These women did not view their segregated taxis as flags of patriarchy; instead they imbued empowering meaning to them by priding themselves in providing safety to other women. Equality and difference were not counterparts in these women's narratives. Rather, these women invested in the potential within the difference ideology to claim equality and undermine discrimination. This is an essential concept to keep in mind as we try to think about constructions of femininity among Muslim women or in the Middle East in general. My participants were women wearing hejab who are participating in the institution of segregation, which in many journalistic and popular narratives are simplified to simply being signs of women's suppression. In contrast, these women constructed an unsettling femininity, one that destabilizes masculine norms of public space by taking on jobs in the masculine domain of taxi service, on streets of cities where gender segregation is central to the construction of

public space. In so doing, these women did not turn their back to the difference ideology and its emphasis on women's family role in order to champion equality. Women's discourse of empowerment was instead constructed through a creative engagement with the discourse of difference and a family-oriented womanhood centering on their desire to achieve equality. Through their jobs, these women navigate the possibilities and limitations of segregation on a daily basis while embodying a stance against traditional gender ideologies. Beyond abiding by segregation as a religious order or fighting against it as a sign of patriarchy, these women creatively engage with the discourse and logic of segregation to navigate possibilities for economic and social empowerment.

# CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In June 2015, Salma, a female mining engineer identified as the first woman working as a coalmine supervisor in South East Iran, was invited to appear on *Mah E Asal*, a popular live TV show that has been broadcasted for more than a decade by Iran's state-run national TV. Her appearance took place during *Ramezan*, Muslims' fasting month. The show's main mission is to make viewers aware of the unheard, inspiring stories of marginalized or token groups. The guests are very diverse and include, for example, survivors of fatal diseases, war veterans, religious figures, community leaders, and successful professionals and entrepreneurs. Their narratives are framed as inspirational manifestations of divine empowerment of human agency, following the state's broader agenda to boost spirituality, religious faith, and revolutionary values in the society during *Ramezan*.

As one of the oldest and most favored live shows— and arguably among the few successful products of the state-run national T.V. — *Mah E Asal*, constitutes a good example of the state's technologies of power for producing religiously devoted, value-centered, and spiritually motivated subjects. It represents a discourse that differentiates between inherently right and wrong ways of being, grounded in the idea(l)s of revolutionary ideology. The show is very careful in presenting cases and stories that feed the state-promoted meta narratives of subjectivity. Even though in recent years it has enjoyed more flexibility in the types of targeted social issues and the way it addresses them, the show is careful to avoid crossing lines between Islamic-revolutionary versus Western-modern models of living and being.

Not surprisingly, issues concerning women are central to the shows' strategic efforts for staying within the state's boundaries of legitimacy. In the majority of cases, the visibility given

to female invitees is centered on their motherhood and wifehood roles, reiterating the state-promoted discourse in which home is the main arena for women's social contributions and personal empowerment. Mothers and wives of war veterans, martyrs, successful entrepreneurs, disease survivors, or ex-felons, to name a few, are invited to be celebrated as pillars of care and love in their families, nurturing the Islamic-revolutionary model of womanhood. Most of the female invitees who discuss their professions on the show tend to be heads of their households — the most recognized and cared about category of women regarding work and employment. Their womanly power in balancing motherhood with breadwinning is praised, and most often the discussion provides a venue for them to make their problems heard.

Very occasionally though, women are invited because of their professional lives, as Salma was. She was invited to narrate her story as the first of a handful of female mining engineers who make their way in the working world as supervisors. The 30-minute conversation between Salma and the host captures, in a fascinating way, the paradoxes embedded in and emerging from women's entrance into traditionally masculine jobs and the ambiguities and uncertainties this entrance creates. To avoid crossing state-produced discursive boundaries of femininity and to narrate Salma's story without giving credit to the "Western" conceptualizations of gender equality and women's empowerment, the host had to create a space in which desegregation could be recognized without an undervaluation of segregation. In this way, public empowerment could be celebrated without scratching the sacredness of the private, and equality could be valued without stepping away from the difference ideology.

During the interview, the host juggled between depicting Salma's career choice as inconsistent with her feminine identity on one hand and appreciating her ability to work in a position more commonly reserved for men while simultaneously maintaining her dignity as an

Iranian woman. In the beginning, Salma was asked to describe her story of becoming a mining engineer. The host searched for exceptional reasons, something about her socialization, family environment, or psychological state that in his eyes would be viewed as a major yet unconventional choice for a woman. Salma, however, had no exceptional reason to share. She was raised in an industrial city where, as she described, mines and mining are integrated into families' economies and culture. Like many boys in their town, she argued, being raised in that environment was a key to her career choice:

*Most families had someone working in the mines or were exposed to the mine and mining issues in some ways. We were the same; two of my uncles were miners and I always was curious to know what they exactly do while under the ground. The image of miners and workers climbing up the mine with blackened, dirty faces fascinated me from when I was very young and kept me interested until I got to college and chose mining engineering.*

Not convinced with the ordinariness and gender neutrality of Salma's story, the host stated:

*But this is also a reality that your job is physically demanding; it contradicts with the core of womanhood and its delicacy. So from this perspective, your job could be frowned upon a little bit. After all it is a rough job. At least in our culture, the family expects love and care from a woman, a wife, a sister. That's the only thing!*

Salma was no stranger to gender norms and cultural expectations from women. However, to her, expressing her own femininity while pursuing the masculine job of mining were not inherently contradictory, in opposition to the viewpoint of the show's host. She went on to remark:

*No one has ever been disappointed with me for not fulfilling my responsibilities as a mother, wife, sister, or daughter because of having a masculine career. Never! I have always tried to maintain my career and family life together although it is a tough job! Just the fact that I am proving that women can do this type of job is very important for me and keeps me going. After me, I have seen many girls who dare to work in mines in my city and this is an invaluable achievement for me […] No one must feel threatened when women step into male-dominated jobs. There are many tasks that women can do better in these fields and they can help industries.*

Moving the conversation forward by agreeing with Salma that women can bring unique talents to workplaces, the host re-directed Salma's point to a contradictory conclusion to the message she had tried to convey to audiences:

*But the point is that recently our ladies show more interest in hard sciences and engineering and are overlooking human and social sciences in which they can be more helpful for building our society and the future of our children and youth. I want our dear Iranian girls to think about this!*

This was the closing remark and the interview ended at this point. This paradoxical moment in what turned out to be a contentious conversation on a widely watched live show occurred when state-run national TV specifically scrutinizes programs for the messages they send out and the kind of life models they put forward. And that is precisely what this dissertation has been about: the clash between contracting ideas about womanhood, as manifested in Salma's story, and the host's final statements.  The implications of these discursive encounters in women's day-to-day lives, particularly in context of work, demonstrate the nuances and characteristics of discursive spheres in which segregation and desegregation, equality and difference, and the public and private are navigated collaboratively.

The goal of this dissertation is to explore how women navigate these discursive domains while dealing with highly discriminatory working environments, given that they work in institutions with bare minimum policies and practices for protecting them against incidents of inequality. In addition, these women must negotiate their identities as females while their career choices are highly gendered or sexualized at different levels. These are the main questions that I set out to address, by drawing on the experiences and narratives of female taxi drivers and engineers, as discussed in the previous chapters.

The Islamic revolution changed the spatial, social, and discursive spheres in which gender and sexuality were produced and navigated, changes which happened suddenly and

radically (Moallem, 2005). The Islamic ideology of gender difference legitimized the institutionalization of segregation, leading to deprivation and the discouragement of women from many areas of education, employment, and entertainment. At the same time, however, the opportunities given to women to explore the public arena in an alternative way — while wearing hejab in mixed-gender environments and pursuing public activities in the comfort zone of segregated spaces — created alternative possibilities for them to navigate empowerment and equality from within the limitations and oppression resulting from a patriarchal gender ideology.

Through an analysis of the characteristics and complexities of the discursive setting in which, women's subjectivities, desires, and aspirations are shaped, and following an interpretive approach for understanding participants' experiences, my findings in this dissertation complicate previous approaches to women's work and employment at two levels. First, my findings uncover the heterogeneity of impediments to women's economic participation, livelihoods, and success.

These findings show that reducing the multifaceted nature of women's struggles and challenges in the male-dominated labor markets of Middle Eastern countries to an overarching state patriarchy deprives scholars and activists from opportunities to address the problem. Chapter 4 of this dissertation showed that to a great extent, the substance of issues facing women in their atypical gender-centered jobs is similar to those of women living in democratic states. Women are challenged to balance work with family life, open paths into the gendered structures of their workplaces, make their voices heard and valued by supervisors and managers, "undo" (Deutsch, 2007) stereotypical assumptions about their capacities, and negotiate equal pay and benefits. While the state's patriarchal gender discourse sets out the context in which possibilities for women's economic participation are produced, the issues women face on day-to-day basis emerge from how individuals and institutions navigate this gender system. This ongoing

discourse demonstrate how women such as Salma, men such as the host of *Mah E Asal*, and institutions like the national broadcasting company implement state-promoted gender discourse in daily encounters with issues surrounding women's work. Regardless of how patriarchal the state is, Salma is a mining engineer whose voice has come from the margins of a male-dominated labor market to the center of a widely watched TV show. She is given a space to make her voice heard and her experiences shared. On the flip side of the coin, regardless of how powerfully Salma's agency shines in the face of structural burdens and inequalities, throughout the conversation the host deliberately reproduces the overarching gender system that devalues these transgressions. Between Salma as a woman and the state as a patriarchal structure stand a whole set of interpersonal and institutional dynamics that are filled with ambiguities, uncertainties, improvisations, and paradoxes. It is from these conditions that limitations to women's public mobility and possibilities for empowerment emerge.

Second, my analysis shows that women's discourse of empowerment does not have to be shaped in absolute contrast to gender ideologies that emerge from patriarchal discourses. What is more important is how women live and interpret manifestations of patriarchal gender discourses in their day-to-day lives as they navigate opportunities for maintaining their own, their families', and their communities' livelihoods. Of course it is discriminative, sexist, and essentialist to argue that women are inherently fitted for care giving and household labor. It is a threat to idea(l)s of equality to deprive or discourage women from economic and political participation, as in the case in Iran. Compulsory hejab is a violation of individual freedom and choice, which constitute the main promises of modernity and development. But do women spend their days and nights lamenting structural dead-ends, awaiting collective actions to dismantle patriarchy at once? No! Women like Salma and my participants are already transforming their personal lives and

communities by actively re-defining segregation, hejab, and difference, cultivating them toward day-to-day empowerment. With almost no structural support or discursive foundation to justify their non-traditional career choices, by the very fact that they are working these jobs, they create a space to prove wrong the discriminative implications of the state's difference ideology. These women claim equality from within the difference discourse and have become agents of occupational desegregation from within the institution and its ideology of segregation.

To close my discussion in this dissertation, I would like to leave the readers with a snapshot of my interview with Fatemeh, as one of a handful of women in Iran who work as truck drivers. Increasingly, these women, along with female bus drivers, are attracting more attention in social media, in the press, and occasionally through national broadcasting. But Fatemeh was one of those who resisted media visibility. She commented:

*I have read a number of interviews with my fellow female truck drivers now and then. But nobody really asks them under what conditions they do this arduous job! Are the married? Do they have kids? What kind of truck they have? An old one like me or better? A while ago a reporting team from our regional broadcasting T.V. had come to our village and I was introduced to them as one of the successful women in the area. They wanted to record my driving, interviewing me, and these sort of things but I did not accept. Media usually expects you to smile and say everything is great in this country and you are easily doing this job as a woman. The only reason I accepted to talk with you is that you are a university student and want this for research! It is not an easy work to do for a woman but I am doing it because it has been a part of my life from young ages!*

The following few quotes from my phone interview with her do not do justice to the rich conversation we had and the inspirational power I could glean from her voice, tone, and even her silence. But this short snapshot of her life leaves us with a great story so that we may continue thinking about women whose day-to-day lives are shaped around spatial and social transgressions, and who unavoidably destabilize gender and spatial norms through the work that they do.

Fatemeh, was born into a religious family in Ghom, the religious capital of Iran, the daughter of a truck driving dad and a mom who she described as the first female driving trainer in Iran. Fatemeh described herself as a devoted Muslim, wearing the most strict form of hejab practiced among Iranian women, providing service to religious communities and volunteering for religious ceremonies. Fatemeh had married a truck driver in her early 20s and was working both alongside her husband and independently:

*I started helping my husband for to earn income first. He had a truck but could not handle long and frequent road trips by himself. He could not afford to hire an assistant either. So I decided to work with him so we can make more money for our children.*

She had begun driving truck at a young age with her dad, who trained her. He later encouraged her to get a license. After some twenty years of truck driving, however, the job was beyond being either an income source or an economic constraint. Driving a truck was so integrated into how she had experienced different stages of her life and navigated her identity as a woman that she did not imagine herself resigning from it despite the difficulties she describes below:

*I love driving in the roads, too! Nothing can calm me down like loading my truck and hitting the road! It gives me peace of mind when I feel I am being productive, doing something useful in this world! transporting a load and making some money for my family. It is a very difficult job for a woman! Maybe I have spent the energy I was supposed to spend during 40 years, in the past 20 years that I have been working. I also run the household by myself. When I am not on the road, I am buried with house chores and making things ready for the kids. But thank God I love what I do and I can handle it!*

Besides the shared challenge of the work-life balance, Fatemeh described conditions on the road as one of the worst for women like her:

*The roads we drive on are not ready for women! The public restrooms are awfully dirty! I myself never can use them! Almost none of the rest areas designated for truck drivers have a space for women. You step in there and you see rows of men sleeping next to each other. I always have to sleep in the truck! The other day I stopped by a mosque to do my noon prayer and even the mosque had no women's section.*

*If your truck breaks down in the middle of the way, as ours did just a few weeks ago, you will be desperate! Me, my daughter, and my husband were stuck in the middle of nowhere for six nights just a few weeks ago. I cannot even describe how hard it was for us!*

Similar to what taxi drivers have reported, Fatemeh viewed police officers as biased and unprepared to deal with women behind the wheel as professionals:

*I have had the worst experiences with police officers. Most of them have never seen a truck with female driver. They assume something must be wrong, stop you, inspect the truck, and find a reason to give you a ticket. They ask for all sort of documents and if they don't find an issue with your license, registration, and permits, they pick on your vehicle or yourself: Are you driving by yourself? Who is in the truck? Where is your husband? Why are your tires worn out?*

But despite the struggles, Fatemeh described the job as central to her and her family's livelihoods. At the time of the interview, she was mother of two sons and one teenage girl. As Fatemeh described it, her daughter was almost raised in their truck. She had resumed driving only two weeks after her daughter was born, and Fatemeh been taking her on most of their trips afterwards:

*When she was born, a truck ride was the only way to get her to sleep. I think it is still with her. Our truck is very old but she sleeps in the back cabin as if she is in a comfortable pension! She is the loyal passenger of our truck! Always ready to pack and hop in whenever we get a service request. I have took her to all sorts of places with me; to south, north, everywhere!*

A truck, in Fatemeh's narratives, was central to how her family life was structured, and interwoven with how she was imagining the future for them. When asked to describe her ideal job in an ideal world, she stated:

*In an ideal world, I would still want to be a truck driver! If you come to our house, you will see despite all other people who have pictures of themselves, their weddings, their kids hung on their walls, we have posters of trucks all over the house [laughing]. Every now and then, we buy new posters and remove the old ones! My kids, my husband and myself are all truck lovers. You are asking me about an ideal world which is way far away. But in such a world I would want a brand-new cargo truck, one of those that you see on foreign T.V. shows, with big living cabins, kitchen facilities, bathrooms, everything inside them. I would want to carry loads to Europe, and all around the world with my kids and husband.*

As a self-identified devout Muslim, a voluntary follower of the Islamic hejab, a mother, wife, and a truck driver, does Fatemeh reinforce or destabilize the Islamic state's idea(l)s of womanhood and femininity? Where does she fall along the binary of Islamic versus Western-liberal femininity? Is she progressive in an Islamic way or Islamic in a modern way? Does she embody agency in the face of structural patriarchy or patriarchal suppressions of women's freedom and mobility? As I set out to suggest in this dissertation, beyond falling into the binaries that constitute the core of modern-liberal discourse (Moallem, 2005; Mahmood, 2009), the narratives of women such as Fatemeh, Salma, and other participants who participated in this research expose the inaccuracy of these very binaries by allowing readers to understand the lives of women living in patriarchal states, particularly in the Middle East. These women navigate the public arena and the challenges and opportunities that come with destabilizing gender norms in their own way, undermining those accounts that either reduce Muslim women in the Middle East as silent victims of patriarchy or imagine their empowerment only as part of collective movements against the states. The narratives of these women concern the complexity of how oppression and empowerment happen, raise alternative interpretations of gender inequality and equality in male-dominated labor markets of the Middle East, and outline the lives of women who have transformed their lives from within an ideology of segregation and patriarchy.

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