Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the re-introduction of shari'a law relating to gender and the family, women's rights suffered a major setback. However, as the process of the Islamic Republic transited from a standpoint of opposition to one of power, as the regime has increasingly legitimized itself, the legal and religious scholars have had to make accommodations in many key areas of Islamic doctrine and law. One of the key areas has been the question of gender relations, and the legal, social and political rights and roles of women. The process of accommodation intensified after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, and has been accompanied by lively debates about the 'question of women'.

Defending or reconstructing notions of gender

I have been following these debates as an anthropologist and a student of Islamic law. My aim is to understand the varying notions of gender that lie at the root of shari'a family rules, and how the custodians of the shari'a in Iran today – the shari'a clerics – attempt variously to perpetuate, modify, or challenge these notions of gender. At first, the main sources used were a number of books and journals, published in both Qom and Tehran, which clearly formed part of a public debate in which highly divergent perspectives were being aired. Two journals, particularly influential, and significance was found were both launched in 1992, but they took radically different positions. One, Payam-e Zan (Women's Message), was launched and run by male clerics who defended the shari'a and the gender inequalities inherent in its legal rules. The other, Zanan (Women), based in Tehran and run by women, argued for gender equality on all fronts.

Zanan advocated a brand of feminism that takes Islam as source of legitimacy. At one level, the issue had a legal section which examined and discussed the restrictions placed on women in Qom and Tehran. From May 1992, the tone and style of these legal articles began to change, slowly but surely taking issue with the very premises on which the shari'a discourse on the position of women is based, and laying bare their inherent gender biases. These articles were unprecedented first, they were no attempt to cover up or rationalize the gender inequalities embedded in shari'a law. Secondly, they had something new to say. There was consistency in the approach and the progression of the arguments. Each article built upon the premises and arguments established in earlier ones. They were never formulated under different male and female names, but it was evident to me that they were written by a single pen. I was well versed in the sources and in the shari'a argumentation.

Before long I found out who the author was: a young cleric, Hojjat al-Eslam Seyyed Mohsen Sa'izadeh. In April 1995, two of the main activists knew the lawyer, Mehrafa Zanjanizadeh, and referred me to him. I had finished a paper in which I analysed Zanjanizadeh's work, and he sent me her un-published manuscripts to study and comment. He also introduced me to gender debates in Qom and facilitated my research there.

Defining the Spatial

This was my first experience of the clerical way of life and thinking. The clerics defend the three premises of the gender segregation and hegemony that organize time and space so that I spent most of my time with them. Sa'izadeh agreed with my analysis of his premises and arguments, and we decided to begin a programme of collaborative research. He provided me with his un-published manuscripts to study and comment. He also introduced me to gender debates in Qom and facilitated my research there.

The four chapters in Part Two recount my discussions with the clerics of Payam-e Zan and their mentor Ayatollah Samei – known for his progressive views on women’s issues. Although they too staunchly defend the immutability of the gender model manifested in Islamic law, they are willing to engage in change and seek new interpretations. They published transcripts of these discussions in their journal in 1996. I show to them to shed light not only on the gender debates but also on clerical modes of thinking and argumentation. Unlike Part One, where the author and the text are clearly defined, in Part Two the author and the text are not only repeated our positions, here the clerics and I managed to engage critically with others.

Zaman was the only cleric I could find who had radical ideas on gender and was willing to air them in public. He later became a victim of the struggle between modernists and traditionalists, which took a new turn following the 1997 presidential election that brought Mohammad Khatami to power. In June 1998, following the publication of an article in the liberal daily newspaper Jomeh (“now closed”), in which he compared the gender views of religious traditionalists in Iran with those of the Taliban in Afghanistan, he was arrested. Five months later he was released; his crime was never announced, but he lost his clerical position and is now forbidden to publish his writings.

The three chapters are framed by an introduction and a Conclusion, placing Iranian texts and debates in the context of religious politics and approaches to gender in Islamic law. Each part begins with a brief introduction to a definitional overview, and each chapter builds on and adds a new dimension to the arguments presented in the preceding one. Chapters in the first two parts begin and end with narratives of my visits to Qom in 1995 and 1997 and meetings with the authors whose texts are discussed. These accounts are intended to draw attention to the taken-for-granted, shared meanings that underlie life in Qom, the familiar routines that inhabitants take as natural. By narrating an ethnography of my personal engagement with a series of texts and their authors, I aim to provide other Muslim women to write more revealingly of their changing trajectories. We need to know more about these personal trajectories if we are to understand the relationship between feminism and religious politics.