Women's Religious Seminaries in Iran

The implementation of the shari’ah and the institutionalization of gender inequality in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution have provoked general discontent among women and triggered their mobilization against segregation laws. As a response to their demands, Islamist women parliamentarians have been forced to prepare motions to defend more adequately women’s needs and rights in both the private sphere of the family and the public sphere, maintaining that the teachings of Islam are not respected.

Women not only challenge the institutionalized gender inequalities by emphasizing the community’s expectations and societal and cultural norms, but also question the ethical and legal grounds supporting these laws. They believe that such undertakings are an attempt to revert and reinterpret Islamic principles. To this end, women mujtahids (doctor of jurisprudence) are needed more than ever. Following the death of Mrs Amini-Tahani, a woman mujtahid, in the early 1980s, Iran has deprived women in order to boost their activity in the public sphere. The seminary has established a credit system which collects money from the pious rich and grants interest-free loans to the poor.

Our interview was constantly interrupted by women who called or came by to seek advice and support in practical and spiritual matters. Some had serious family problems, others asked religious questions. Fatemeh Amini believes that women are denied power. Because authorities interpret and apply Islamic principles, women are denied power. As a result, my working environment is male-dominated and the like. These are taught by university professors. Owing to the lack of financial means, I have not been able to hire a number of teachers. As a result, many of my students have been enrolled for five years without being able to finish all courses. Our aim is to educate women mujtahids as well as women capable of finding solutions to women’s problems, including their social problems. Our goal is to contribute to women’s development by giving impetus to their creativity, thereby also increasing their self-esteem.

Fatemeh Amini: founder of the earliest women’s seminaries
The first religious seminary for women was founded in Qom in 1972 by Fatemeh Amini. She met her in 1994 at her fifth religious seminary, a modest two-storey building in a bazaar neighborhood in northern Tehran. Unlike her students who wore a manteqeh (headscarf), she wore a black chador. They all take their shoes off before entering the main hall and walk around in socks. While several older women were seeing a traditional Iranian blanket for the trousseau of a poor bride, Fatemeh Amini was sitting at the door and explained that in addition to training women, the Mujtahids Fatemeh-ye Zahra religious seminary also financially and morally assists neediest women.

Children of the dominant interpretations
Women’s mobilization against the dispossession of women’s power in all areas of the realm of the sacred is not limited to training women mujtahids. Because several articles of the Civil Code (e.g. men’s unilateral right to divorce and polygamy) have religious and political origins, women have been working to change them. Házéri and Mazumdar have discussed the necessity for the reform of laws concerning divorce, polygamy, and child custody.

Nahid Shid is a lawyer who has both a religious and a university education and has initiated several amendments to the divorce law, in particular ‘rajál al-nafis’, the principle that says when a man files for divorce his wife’s case can be compensated by her husband for the housework she has carried out during the marriage. She maintains that ‘the bulk of the enforced laws can and should be changed because they are not divine orders. They are based on secondary orders. Blood money is one of them, it was determined when men were valorized as warriors who contributed to the expansion of the Islamic state. Women, however, were deemed of such social values. Times have changed and the law should reflect this change. This law cannot be functional in a society in which women are medical doctors, university professors, engineers, and the like. Blood money should be the same for men and women.

By questioning traditional gender roles and identities, and by advocating equal rights, these women are also constructing their own religious models, thereby acquiring autonomy vis-à-vis male religious authorities.

A Z A D E H K I A N - T H I ƒ B A U T
Regional Issues

Women’s meeting place for prayer and commemoration of the Novruz in Gonbad-e Kavous (Northern Iran).

Notes

The analysis of the Qur’anic verse on polygamy shows that this right is recommended in some specific cases and exclusively in order to meet a social need in view of expanding social justice. [..] Contrary to the ancient time, the modern state and its social institutions are conceived to assist needy families. According to the Qur’an, men and women are equal. [..] The society needs women doctors and engineers as well as women mujtahids. But there is an important resistance against women attaining the degree of jihād (interpretation). Without these obstacles, which seriously hinder their training, we could have had at least 50 women mujtahids since the revolution. A lot of young women study at these seminaries but nobody encourages them. When I came to Tehran nobody (no religious authority) supported me either although women have lost their haid (the black cover provided me with a basement flat) and a factory owner paid my teachers. One of my students then suggested that we move to Avenue Dowlat and introduced me to the Imam of the neighbourhood mosque who agreed to help me. He gave me a huge room serving as a classroom with no heating. We paid for the educational and other expenses of their children, prepare dinners for their daughters, equip their homes with water and electricity, etc. We also provide financial assistance to a school with 2000 students in a poor neighborhood in Qom, where I founded Fatemeh-ye Zahra religious seminary in 1988.

A divorced woman and a mother of two daughters, Fatemeh Amini is convinced of the validity of polygamy and its necessity. She holds that ‘the principle says when a man files for divorce his wife’s case can be compensated by her husband for the housework she has carried out during the marriage. She maintains that the bulk of the enforced laws can and should be changed because they are not divine orders. They are based on secondary orders. Blood money is one of them, it was determined when men were valorized as warriors who contributed to the expansion of the Islamic state. Women, however, were deemed of such social values. Times have changed and the law should reflect this change. This law cannot be functional in a society in which women are medical doctors, university professors, engineers, and the like. Blood money should be the same for men and women.

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