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### Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

State and the Paradox of Gender Segregation in Iran

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Raka Ray, Chair  
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Fall 2013



## Abstract

### State and the Paradox of Gender Segregation in Iran

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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This dissertation is about state formation processes and gender segregation practices in postrevolutionary Iran. It uses gender segregation as a policy and spatial indicator to trace the shifts in state power between the establishment of the Islamic Republic (in 1979) and 2009. It explores the politics around the production of gender-segregated spaces, the imperatives of the state that produces them, and the implications for women's public presence.

Building on 182 interviews, more than 16 months of fieldwork between 2008 and 2011, this dissertation offers a thorough account of the (trans)formation of three major sites of gender segregation in Tehran, Iran, namely women-only parks, segregated buses, and men-only sports stadiums.

Throughout this work, I argue that current models that attribute the endurance of the Islamic Republic of Iran to its application of coercion and prohibitive measures, fail to account for the productivity of the Iranian state power. Thus, instead of dismissing the Iranian government mode of rule as that of religious totalitarianism using repression, I illustrate that it is more productive to look closely at the intricacies of power and the multitudes of their logics, in order to understand spaces, gender, Islamic rule, and subject formation.

This dissertation contributes to theories of the state, feminist theories, and theories of urban governmentality: First, a close examination of the state's official rationales for gender segregation policies and the tensions and problems these policies address illuminates how the state continuously reconfigures its power in order to maintain its legitimacy in an increasingly globalized world with its shifting geopolitical alignments. By delineating several historically contingent shifts in gender segregation policies, I illustrate the broader shift in the Iranian state power from authoritarian sovereignty in the 1980s to disciplinary governmentality.



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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor Raka Ray, without whose guidance and persistent support this dissertation would not have been possible. I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Michael Burawoy, Professor Cihan Tugal, Professor Saba Mahmood and Professor Norma Clair Moruzzi who also showed much support and enthusiasm for my work.

In addition, a thank you to Jennifer Carlson, Abigail Andrews and other members of the Raka Ray Dissertation Group whose careful comments have contributed to the improvement of this research. I would also like to thank to the Al-Fallah Program, Center for Middle East Studies at UC-Berkeley, the Center for Race and Gender and the Center for the Study of Right Wing Movements at UC-Berkeley for their financial support granted through predoctoral fellowship.

## **Introduction**

### **State and the Paradox of Gender Segregation in Iran**

In April 2009, on a sunny afternoon, I met with Reza Mostafavi, the director of social and cultural studies at Tehran Municipality, in hopes of designing and conducting a survey of women who use municipality-supervised women-only spaces. In order to convince him of the significance of such a survey and the ways in which it could help the municipality to evaluate its projects, I began our conversation by highlighting what I conceived of as the positive effects of such spaces. I shared with him my observations of women's presence in public spaces in Tehran compared with similar cities in the region (e.g., Cairo, Beirut, Dubai). "Whereas in most of these cities, public spaces are overtly masculine and dominated by men," I told the director, "city spaces in Tehran seem to be comfortably populated by women with different class backgrounds and from various walks of life." In order to justify the need for conducting a survey about the use of women-only spaces, I explained that in my opinion gender segregation is one of the factors that has facilitated the presence of women in public spaces. "Thus," I told Mr. Mostafavi, "it would be great to conduct a survey and document the positive impacts of such spaces, which have mushroomed under the mayorship of Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf."

In the course of the conversation I realized that the more I highlighted the increasing presence of women in Tehran, the less interest the director showed in facilitating my survey. Speaking his mind, and not the official policy of the municipality, Mr. Mostafavi tried to direct my attention to what he formulated as the "worrying" implications of gender-segregated spaces, which had made him reassess the plans for their expansion.

First, he was concerned about the empowering effects of such spaces and how they had led to the emergence of a "feminist consciousness." He regarded this development with alarm:

These segregated spaces have become safe spaces in which some dangerous feminist ideas are spread. Women get together, discuss their problems, and inform one another about their legal rights. This is problematic!

When I probed him to elaborate on what he thought was "problematic," he said:

Let me give you an example. When we decided to open women-only parks, we were thinking of housewives stuck in small apartments all day, putting up with their children, cooking and cleaning. Not having the space to relax, vent, or exercise, these women get depressed, anxious, and impatient. So when the poor husband returns from work, she has no patience and would easily pick on him or start a quarrel.

The opening of women-only parks, according to the director, was aimed at "saving the poor husbands who look to their homes as quiet havens." These parks, Mr. Mostafavi had hoped, would act as safety valves where women could release their daily pressures and "get ready to welcome their husbands with a smile!" Things had turned out different, as the director suggested: "Look! Women go to these parks, sit together, talk with one another, and somehow all this talk turns them into feminists! Then they come back home and pick on their husbands even more than before!"



Mr. Mostafavi's second concern was about the transformative effects gender-segregated spaces have had on the division of labor in families:

I don't understand what's positive about women's increased presence in public spaces, especially at nights. Once, during one of my nightly evaluation visits to public libraries, I saw a few women in the women's section. My God! I was shocked. You know that these libraries are open overnight. It was around midnight. "Don't they have fathers? Husbands? What are they doing here in the library at midnight?" I asked myself. So I approached one of them to figure out what she was doing in the library at midnight. It turned out that she was a doctor, a general practitioner. She wanted to take the medical specialty exams, but had two small children and with them at home she had no time or space to study for her exams. She told me that she was happy to have found that we had recently opened an overnight public library, with a designated space for women, in their neighborhood. She takes care of her children until 5 or 6 p.m., when her husband returns from work. They eat dinner together, after which she leaves the children with her husband and comes to the library to study for her exams.

As he stood up to guide me out of his office, he told me: "You find this positive perhaps!"

This conversation captures the difference between what the state intended gender-segregated spaces to be and what they in fact became. Gender-segregated spaces can seem to be a way to keep women out of public space, but their effect has been to bring women into the public sphere. Women embrace these segregated spaces not simply because of some flat version of Islamic ethics, but because of many practical and sometimes even non-Islamic concerns. In practice, gender-segregated spaces have fostered a feeling of women's entitlement to the public sphere and a way for them to lay increasing claim to it. Thus, although the state implemented its gender-segregation policy in order to better regulate its (female) population, the policy produced a population more mobilized to question and challenge state authority. The state's attempt to recover legitimacy produced a public discussion of the state's failures, intensifying its fragmentation.

This study is an inquiry into the politics of the production of gender-segregated spaces in postrevolutionary Iran. It examines the spatial dynamics of gender-segregated spaces and what these dynamics register about the transformations of state power in Iran. This study also highlights the ways in which gender-segregated spaces set the terms of the very politics that ultimately shape them. In doing so, this work links everyday practices of traversing the city with macro-level dynamics of power and politics.

### **Gender Segregation in Iran**

There is a long history of gender segregation in Iran. In fact gender segregation, along with hijab, has its roots in premodern Iran (see Najmabadi 2005). Under the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925), gender segregation was a predominant feature of Persian society. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, public spaces were populated by men. Women's place was at home, and even the home was divided into the inviolable private space of women (*andarooni*) and the semipublic space of men (*birooni*). When traversing public spaces, women had to cover themselves from head to toe, enveloped in robes, as if inside "mobile homes" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785). Their daily errands to the bazaar, clothier, and public baths would inevitably lead to

“mixing” with men. Such “mixing” was associated with “depraved women” or with the popular classes, since only women of these classes had to leave the alleged dignity of the privacy of *andaroonis* (Najmabadi 2005, 153). Women of higher classes often had domestic workers who would run their errands for them, or they would have the bazaar merchants, the clothier, and hairdresser from the baths (for example) come to their home; they would also frequently be given exclusive access to public baths and the streets leading to them at specific time slots.

In their encounters with Europeans, Najmabadi argues, the Qajar shahs and officials first highlighted their society’s homosociality as a marker of difference from heterosocial Europe. Eventually, the propagation of the discourse of modernity, which translated homosociality into a key signifier of backwardness, turned it into a source of anxiety for Iran’s modernizers. Thus, the modernizing tendency was to desegregate men and women, and as Najmabadi puts it, “overcome women’s backwardness (transform them into companionate wives, educated mothers, useful citizens)” (154).

In narrating the history of theater and cinema in Iran, Mehrabi (1989) describes how during the nineteenth century, young Iranian students and diplomats who had been in Europe and become infatuated by its cinematography decided, upon their return to Iran, to open private theaters to show European motion pictures. Some, like Colonel Ali-Naqi Vasiri, a renowned musicologist and composer, attempted to pave the way for women’s entrance into the public sphere, including cinemas. Together with Khanbaba Tehrani, the first Iranian filmmaker and the founder of Iran’s cinema industry under the Qajars, Colonel Vasiri created the first women-only theater in Iran and when it later burned down, used the fire as an excuse to justify the necessity of male presence and the launch of mixed theaters. In 1926, Tehrani made his case in a statement published in the Tehran daily newspaper *Nahid*:

When one remembers the pitiful incident in which many women and children, anxious and scared, desperately escaped the theater, one cannot but realize that had they been accompanied by their husbands and brothers and (male) relatives, with the courage that one expects from the male sex, the men could have prevented this level of anxiety and instructed the women on how to patiently deal with danger—and ultimately rescued them from the fire. (Quoted in Mehrabi 1989, 18)

By the early twentieth century and toward the end of the Qajar dynasty, attempts had already been made to transform the Iranian public order by carving out women-only spaces within the public sphere. Nevertheless it wasn’t until the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) that desegregation, along with de-veiling, became official state policy. The Pahlavis adopted a modernizing discourse that focused on the emancipatory effects of gender heterosocialization. Through its desegregation policies, the state sought to modernize Iranian women and transform them into publicly visible citizens. According to Najmabadi, women of the urban upper classes eventually began to claim the streets.

The Pahlavis oversaw the rapid modernization of urban space. Unsurprisingly, the main characteristic of modern urban design and spatial order in Tehran was a slavish copying of American and European modern structures, with many of the plans influenced by architect Victor Gruen, who pioneered the design of shopping malls in the United States. Examples include open kitchen designs (the removal of the boundary between *andarooni* and *birooni*), bars and cafés, shopping malls, and supermarkets. Modernization brought with it women’s education

and entrance into the workforce, the commercialization of products, the expansion of consumerism, and, most importantly, the formation of an urban middle class—all of which pushed women (of middle and upper classes) out of the privacy of their homes and into the publicness of the streets, shopping malls, universities, and workplaces. These developments reversed the traditional equation: mixing with men was no longer a signifier of backwardness but rather a marker of modernity.

Mandatory de-veiling was also an attempt to modernize Iranian women—or rather, an attempt to exhibit them as signifiers of Iran’s modernity. Nevertheless, as Yeganeh (1993, 15) argues, “The Pahlavi era had by no means succeeded in totally eradicating these practices [gender segregation and veiling].” Despite the central state’s efforts to modernize (read Westernize) Iranian society and eliminate any markers of difference from the West, Iranian society remained quite conservative with regard to male-female integration. Although men and women were officially encouraged to mix freely at work and in the public domain, women were still socially restricted by acceptable codes of behavior, dress, and speech. In short, as Yeganeh demonstrates, neither gender segregation nor hijab were new concepts introduced to Iranian society by the Islamic regime that was established in 1979, after the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty.

Within the liminal space of the revolution, social rules and norms were suspended. At the peak of revolutionary struggles, Ayatollah Khomeini, then the revolutionary leader recently returned to Tehran from exile, addressed women as independent individuals and asked them to attend public demonstrations and ignore the night curfew. He stated that the fulfillment of their revolutionary duties did not require their husbands’ and fathers’ permission or presence. “Khomeini’s call to rise up against the Shah took away any doubt in the minds of many devoted Muslim women of all classes about the propriety of taking to the streets during the day or at night” (Bahramitash 2003b, 233). With the overthrow of the shah in 1979, attempts to establish the new regime began—and so did attendant conflicts. For example, once in power, Ayatollah Khomeini was faced with requests to bar women from being present when he held general audiences. He admitted that he had managed to “throw the shah out with these women,” and that there was no way he could bar them from attending his lectures (Kurzman 2004, 151).

If women were to remain “public,” however, new norms and rules had to be established. “The Iranian Revolution,” writes Charles Kurzman (2004, 150), “was thoroughly gendered.” Both during the revolution and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the “woman question” was a central element in the Islamists’ discourse. To craft a nation anew, new definitions of “womanhood” were formulated, promising women the restoration of their lost dignity, humanity, and respect. The image of this “new woman” was pitted against the image of the “Western” or the “Westoxicated” woman, who was characterized as “a Barbie doll” (Osanloo 2006, 196).

The Islamic regime brought an end to the Pahlavi legacy but not to the modernization process. In fact, the rate of urbanization increased after the revolution. As Kano (1996, 427) points out: “The urban population growth rate rose from 4.9 per cent during 1966–77 to 5.4 per cent during 1976–86, indicating that the revolution was not very effective in controlling urbanization.”

In many ways, the prerevolutionary spatial order stayed intact. For example, in Tehran, the municipality kept using the comprehensive plan for urban development that had been designed under the shah. The process of Islamization did not terminate or reverse the

modernization process; rather, it claimed an alternative modern that would do away with the moral and practical pitfalls of Western modernity.

First and foremost, the new regime had to take measures to demonstrate its “Islamic” and “popular” features. New boundaries had to be drawn. Compulsory veiling and the gender segregation of public spaces were among the most significant measures taken by the state to fulfill these goals. Thus, gender segregation was transformed from a popular act upheld by society itself into a state project. Beaches, universities, and public transportation became segregated. Women and men were banned from attending each other’s sports matches. Segregated entrances to governmental buildings were established, and in most places men and women would form separate queues. There were conflicts among the revolutionaries as to how drastic the gender segregation measures should be. It is stated that when Khomeini heard that a group of hard-liners had divided university classrooms by installing walls, he ordered them to dismantle the walls immediately (see Shahrokni and Dokouhaki 2012).

Nevertheless, in the years that followed, gender segregation did become a central state policy. It has been carried out in various stages and has taken different shapes:

- Separate spaces for men and women within a single larger space. Examples include buses and beaches. These divided spaces have separate entrances for men and women that are often unequal in terms of both quantity and quality. This is the dominant form of segregation, and the move has been toward the equalization of these separate spaces.
- Men-only spaces where women are prohibited from entering. Sports stadiums are a primary example.
- Women-only spaces where men are prohibited from entering. There are women-only parks, banks, and buses. Women still have access to mixed facilities. These are “extra” spaces created for women.

In summary, gender segregation in Iranian society has gone through three phases: The first phase was the premodern era in which gender segregation was carried out socially. The second phase was under the Pahlavis, after Iranians encountered Western modernity; during this phase, the central state pursued a project of gender desegregation in order to modernize the society and eradicate homosociality. With the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, gender segregation became an official state policy. In this third phase, which continues to the present day, following Iran’s spatial shifts allows one to comprehend its political shifts. That connection is central to the questions that guide this study.

## **Research Questions**

This study is organized around the creation of gender-segregated spaces in Iran and their implications. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1. What can shifting gender segregation practices show us about the Iranian state and its shifting strategies of governing and maintaining legitimacy?
2. How do local and global politics condition the production of gender-segregated spaces?

In order to respond to these questions, I examine three illustrative cases of gender segregation in Tehran: women-only parks, gender-segregated buses, and men-only sports stadiums. I bring these three cases together in an effort to better theorize gender segregation as a state policy, in its multiple incarnations across time and space. Identifying the commonalities and the differences across these three cases—and the ways they defy existing explanations—provides the framework to challenge the one-dimensional conceptualization of both gender segregation and the state in

Iran. These cases are not meant to offer a controlled comparison, but instead to bring together shared strands, releasing each from treatment as an exception. Each case marks the others' particularity, highlighting features of this process at different scales and in relation to one another and to larger trends (Hart 2002).

These spatial practices are often lumped under the all-encompassing term “gender segregation.” In other words, most commentators take these segregated spaces to be the different expressions of a single, top-down policy that has its roots in the patriarchy of Islamic gender ideology, the ruling ideology of the Iranian state. I contend that the different practices illustrated in these three case studies represent different spatial strategies and that “gender segregation” is a blunt instrument to understand its specific forms.

In order to grasp these nuances I offer a materially grounded analysis of gender segregation practices prevalent in postrevolutionary Iran and highlight their diverse—and sometimes paradoxical—implications. Instead of arguing for or against these practices, I explore the politics around the production of gender-segregated spaces, the imperatives of the state and market that produces them, and the impact they have on women's experience of, and mobility in, the city.

### **Research Design and Method**

I conducted more than sixteen months of fieldwork in Tehran, Iran between 2008 and 2011. For each of the three case studies, I collected data through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research. Participant observation in each site enabled me to gain a rich view of people's lived experiences, revealing the particularities of gender arrangements at the moment of study. It also offered insight into the ways people talked about gender-segregated spaces, providing a chance for informal conversation with both men and women without explicitly highlighting the stigmatized term “gender segregation” (which is loaded with negative connotations even in Iran, where it is widely practiced). I also conducted 182 interviews both with women who use these spaces and with state and city officials. These interviews helped me gain insight into the different ways the city officials had tried not just to regulate women's movements but also to accommodate their access to the city. Meanwhile, archival materials complemented my data and helped me understand the historical context for the development of gender-segregated spaces. I reviewed 729 newspaper reports, municipal records, and government documents on gender segregation from 1979 to 2011. These data allowed me to trace the change from the invocation of Islam as the sole legitimate source of the state's authority to the invocation of varied, and sometimes conflicting, discourses (including secular liberal discourses on women's rights, health, and the like).

While the focus of this study is on gender-segregated spaces in Tehran, I must note that gender segregation practices are prevalent in other cities as well. In fact the first women-only parks in Iran were opened not in Tehran but in Isfahan and Qom. However, as capital cities are where the vast majorities of modern productive activities are concentrated and where the vast majority of both educational and paid employment opportunities are, and as the capital cities, especially in developing countries, are stages where images of modernity and development are both constructed and presented, the focus of this study is on gender-segregated spaces in Tehran.

The three cases help highlight different aspects of state power and its transformation over the course of three decades, from 1979 to 2011. While both the cases of women-only parks and gender-segregated buses illustrate instance in which the state shifts from functioning as the prohibitor to undertakings the work of provision, the case of sports stadium serves as a negative

case where this shift has not occurred. The Islamic Republic has consistently, since its establishment, prohibited women from attending men's sports matches. While the first two cases offer an opportunity to highlight different features, or enabling factors, of the same process, the case of sports stadiums offers an opportunity to analyze an instance in which the state does not undertake the work of provision.

### *Women-Only Parks: The Mothers' Paradise*

During my fieldwork in Tehran, I regularly visited the Mothers' Paradise, the first of the many women-only parks now available in Tehran. I visited the park on the first day of the week, Saturday, on the middle days of the weeks, Monday and Tuesday, and on the final day of the week, Thursday. Friday is the weekend in Iran during which the park is opened to families. The park was open from 8am to 8pm. Thus, I attended the park during three different time slots: 8am to noon, when most of the park attendants were housewives and elderly women along with small children; noon to 4pm, when the park was less populated and used mainly by high school students released from their schools; and 4pm to 8pm, when the park hosted mostly working women, who on their way back from work, would stop at the Mothers' Paradise to do some exercise and use the sporting equipment installed in the park. This allowed me to sample a diverse array of women who attended the women-only park.

While attending the park, I would initiate informal conversations with women to understand how and why they came to attend the women-only parks rather than the mixed parks, and what advantages or disadvantages they saw in having women-only spaces, such as the Mothers' Paradise. I also observed how women interacted in the segregated spaces. After each visit, I wrote field notes in Persian (Farsi), which I later translated into English.

In addition, I conducted sixty-seven informal and fifteen formal interviews with women I recruited from convenience samples during my visits. The women ranged in age from nineteen to sixty-five; the formal interviewees ranged in age from twenty to sixty-one. The interviews lasted on average about one hour and were recorded. For the respondents' protection, transcripts contain only pseudonyms and are kept in a secured place. The questions asked about the respondents' experiences, their reasons for attending the park, factors facilitating or complicating their visits, the kinds of activities they perform in the parks, and their memories of their encounters with both the female and the male guards inside and outside the park. While respondents were recruited through convenience samples, the variety of time slots helped determine the selection of a cross-section of Tehranian women.

Finally, I reviewed newspaper clippings and government documents on gender segregation from 1979 to 2011. These data allowed me to trace not only the shift between 1979 and 2011 from women's exercise as a problem to women's exercise as a solution to health problems, but also the development of the state's women-only parks project.

### *Gender-Segregated Busing*

During my fieldwork in Tehran, I rode the full routes of three bus lines, from end to end, one connecting the city north to south, one east to west, and one women-only route downtown. On each route, I rode the buses continuously during four different time slots over the course of a week: the 6 to 8 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m. rush hours; 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., when most women do their grocery shopping; and 10 p.m. to midnight. This allowed me to sample a diverse array of women riders across the city. While riding the buses, I initiated informal and group conversations with women bus riders to understand how and why they came to ride the buses and what role gender-

segregated busing played in this decision. I also observed how women and men interacted in the segregated spaces and how they related to markers of gender division, such as bars separating the men's and women's sections. After each ride, I wrote field notes in Persian (Farsi), which I later translated into English.

In addition, I conducted fifty-three informal and seventeen formal interviews with female passengers I recruited from convenience samples during bus rides. The women ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-one; the formal interviewees ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-eight, and included four university students, eight housewives, one high-school teacher, one retired nurse, one accountant, one domestic worker, and one graphic designer. I met with these women in coffee shops, parks, and their homes. The interviews lasted on average about one hour and were recorded. For the respondents' protection, transcripts contain only pseudonyms and are kept in a secured place. The questions asked about the respondents' bus ride experiences, their reasons for riding the bus, factors facilitating or complicating their rides, and their memories of past bus ridership. While respondents were recruited through convenience samples, the variety of bus times and routes helped determine the selection of a cross-section of Tehranian women. Also, although the only women sampled were those who *did* ride the bus, their perspectives are the most relevant for illuminating what motivates women to do so.

Finally, I reviewed newspaper clippings and government documents on gender segregation from 1979 to 2011 and interviewed twelve city and government officials (two in the bus organization, three city councilors, two deputy mayors, four members of parliament, and one former governor of Tehran). These data allowed me to trace not only the shift between 1979 and 2011 from a predominantly male to a heavily female bus ridership, but also the development of the state's gender-segregated busing policy. The archival study and interviews with bureaucrats showed the reorganization of public transportation in Tehran, the processes through which women's mobility had entered into the official discourse, and the different ways the city officials had tried not just to regulate women's movements, but also to accommodate their access to places of work, education, and consumption.

### *Sports Stadiums: Freedom Sports Complex*

I was told that women were banned from attending men's sports matches in Iran. However, upon my arrival, I realized that the ban applies mostly to soccer matches. For most of the other sports, including basketball and volleyball, women were assigned to specific sections within the stadiums. During my fieldwork in Tehran, I attended six volleyball matches (four matches at the National Volleyball League matches, and two at the Asian Youth Volleyball Championship), and three basketball matches, all at the National Basketball League.

While attending the matches, I would initiate informal conversations with women to understand how and why they came to attend the matches, what obstacles they faced in order to be able to watch the matches, and why they preferred to watch the match inside the stadium rather than from the TV. I also observed how women interacted inside the stadium, both with other women and with the male fans and players. After each visit, I wrote field notes in Persian (Farsi), which I later translated into English.

I conducted twenty-three informal and seven formal interviews with women I recruited from convenience samples during my visits. The women ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-four. The formal interviews lasted on average about one hour and were recorded. For the respondents' protection, transcripts contain only pseudonyms and are kept in a secured place. The questions asked about the respondents' experiences, their reasons for attending the matches,

factors facilitating or complicating their attendance, and their memories of their encounters with both the female and the male fans inside and outside the stadiums. In addition to female fans I interviewed both the director of Freedom Stadium and the Head of Security. I also interviewed three members of the White Scarf Girls, a group of feminist activists who had organized a campaign to demand women's right of entry to sports stadiums.

Finally, I reviewed newspaper clippings and government documents on gender segregation from 1979 to 2011. These data allowed me to trace the shift between 1979 and 2011 from the ban on women's sports spectatorship from a non-issue to a national problem.

## **Literature Review**

### *State and Governance in Iran*

Despite the geopolitical importance of Iran and the mounting global concern over the state's practices at both the domestic and the international levels, the Iranian state and its diverse mechanisms of rule have largely been neglected in mainstream sociology. Studies of state formation in Iran have tended to focus on the state's religious dimension or on its (trans)formation as a theocratic state (Arjomand 1988, 2009; Banuazizi 1994; Chehabi 1991; Moaddel 1986). Banuazizi (1994), for example, shows how by mobilizing Islam as a source of legitimacy, the state has ironically contributed to the delegitimization of clerics, who, as the bastions of religion, have come to be blamed for the failures of the Islamic state. Similarly, Chehabi (1991) points out that by drawing on Islam as the main source of its legitimacy, the Iranian state has created a legitimation crisis for both the clerics and the state.

By insisting on a narrow focus on Islam, these studies miss the possibility that the state may draw on multiple sources for its legitimacy. Additionally, most studies of the Iranian state have focused on the state's negative, prohibitive, and repressive power, and thus have characterized the state as: (1) an Islamist state that thrives on its anti-American and anti-West rhetoric (Kraus 2010; Saghafi 2005); (2) a patriarchal state that discriminates against women (Moallem 2005; Moghadam 1999; Tohidi 2007); or (3) an authoritarian state that curtails human rights (Afshari 1994; Miller 1996; Osanloo 2009; Sansarian 1992). In most of these works, the Iranian state is treated as a single actor with a systematic program of social transformation. Additionally, in this literature, the endurance of the Islamic Republic of Iran is attributed to its application of force, coercion, and repressive measures. This emphasis on repression raises the questions of why and how the state has survived. Overstating Iran's repressive power—its disabling of undesired effects—leads to the neglect of the various ways in which the state *enables* those effects that it does desire. Some exceptions aside (Adelkhah 2000; Harris 2010; Keshavarzian 2005), the Iranian state's productive power has rarely been discussed.

In their attempts to account for social developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran, social scientists have often reduced the Iranian state to its religious—that is, Islamic—dimension. For them, it is often the contraction and expansion of this dimension that explains developments. Pitting civil society against the state, their accounts understand civil society as constantly pursuing the contraction of the “Islamic,” while the state is constantly seeking to expand the “Islamic” by curtailing the civil society's activities. According to these scholars, change comes when civil society activists manage to achieve hegemony over the more “modern” or “reformist” of the Islamic discourses on gender equality, or to instrumentalize and hence modify the Islamic character of the state by latching onto “Islamic feminism” (see Mir-Hosseini 2006; Mojab 2001; Moghadam 2002), or to transcend, in what has been referred to as the “post-Islamist turn,” Islam as a frame of reference altogether (Bayat 1996, 2005).



Analyses that demonize the Iranian state by romanticizing Iranian civil society obscure the role of struggles, negotiations, and bargaining that happen both within the state and between the state and the society. When it comes to accounting for the changes in women's status under the Islamic Republic, these scholars either dismiss or downplay the role of the Iranian state and its role in the ways things have unfolded in the last three decades, or they present the state as a fixed, monolithic entity that is reduced either to its Islamic dimension represented by the clergy ("the mullahs") or to the government. Therefore, as James Ferguson (2006, 91) notes, "This focus on civil society obscures more than it reveals."

### *Women and the State in Iran*

Long before it was concerned about Iran's possible access to the nuclear bomb, the Western media was concerned about the "chador bomb,"<sup>1</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini's call for the women in Islam to wear the chador. The Iranian revolution was described as, and therefore reduced to, a revolution that returned its women to a shrouded life. "Behind the veil,"<sup>2</sup> "beyond the chador,"<sup>3</sup> "beneath the scarf,"<sup>4</sup> Iranian women's lives were and still are under the scrutiny of the Western eye.

It was not only in the popular media that the veil became the central element through which Iranian women's stories were told; in scholarly circles, too, much attention was focused on Iranian women's dress code and compulsory veiling as a state policy rooted in an Islamic doctrine of modesty. Treating veiling as a practice based on the Iranian state's patriarchal gender ideology rooted in Islam, these scholars argue that the veil not only serves as an identity marker for the Islamist state, but also facilitates the regulation and control of women's bodies and public presence in the name of an Islamic morality (Moallem 2005; Tohidi 1991). These studies highlight veiling's oppressive character and attribute to it discriminatory and disabling effects (see Moghisi 1999, 2009). While this approach was prevalent especially during the first decade of the Islamic Republic, in the following decades scholars started investigating the various ways in which Iranian women made sense of the veil, embraced it, accommodated it, or made use of it (Hoodfar 1997; Zahedi 2007). For example, Norma Clair Moruzzi (2008, 226) examines how, in contemporary Iran, hijab, "like other sumptuary codes," acts as a "discourse of differential class and of social status." Fariba Adelkhah (2000) argues how the veil served as a "passport" for Iranian women, and argues, as Arlene MacLeod (1991) has in her study of Egyptian women, that the veil has legitimized and facilitated devout women's presence in Iran's public spaces.

Other scholars have adopted a more contextual approach to veiling that takes into account its historical variations. Hamideh Sedghi (2007) offers a historical account of why urban women were veiled in the early 1900s, unveiled from 1936 to 1979, and then again re-veiled after the 1979 revolution. Similarly, Afsaneh Najmabadi (1993, 2000, 2005) focuses on the historically contingent functions that the veil has served.

Most accounts about Iranian women divide the women into two groups: passive victims of a religious/political power that stands above them or militant feminists who resist, challenge, or otherwise take to task this religious/political power. Missing from such narratives are the stories of millions of women who are neither passive victims nor feminist activists. Thus Iranian

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Jaynes, "Iranian Women: Looking beyond the Chador," *New York Times*, 22 April 1979, SM10.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Johnson, "Behind the Veil," *New York Times*, 22 October 2000, BR12.

<sup>3</sup> Jaynes, "Iranian Women."

<sup>4</sup> Jere Longman, "A Quiet Revolution in Iran: Beneath Coat and Scarf, Iranian Women Discover the Freedom to Play," *New York Times*, 26 May 1998, p. A1.

women's daily lives are dramatized and romanticized but never carefully portrayed or meticulously studied (see Mahdavi 2009).

Finally, as was the case with the studies of the Iranian state, most of the studies that deal with women and the state in Iran conflate the religious aspect of the state with its undemocratic structure. Thus, in most cases Islam is introduced as the root cause of the obstacles Iranian women face (see Moghissi 1999). Taking an anti-orientalist perspective, other scholars have attempted to salvage Islam by demonstrating the positive implications of some of the religious rulings (see Haeri 1989 on temporary marriage, and Hoodfar 1997 on the veil) or by arguing that there are different readings of Islam and that the more moderate Islam is actually a local/indigenous response that should be appreciated (Mir-Hosseini 1999). In a similar vein, Sadr and Hoodfar (2010) have argued that the problem is not with Islam but with the undemocratic structure of the Islamic Republic. Only a few have situated the Iranian state and Iranian women within the broader social, political, and historical context to study the contingent dimension of developments in women's status after the 1979 revolution (see Hoodfar and Sadeghi 2009; Osanloo 2009; Paidar 1997). In other words, what's missing from all these studies is an attempt to treat the Iranian state as a modern state that is situated within a broader domestic and international political field and thus needs to grapple with myriad factors to maintain legitimacy.

### *Women and the City*

Research shows that historically, femininity has been associated with the private sphere, confinement, and immobility, while masculinity has been linked with mobility and the public sphere (Bondi and Domosh 1998; Deutsch 2002; McDowell 1999). Often, women's status was associated with staying in the house (Kandiyoti 1988) and women's presence in (masculine) public spaces was treated as an exception to or interruption in the male-dominated public order. Women's confinement, many suggest, is an effect of patriarchal control and gender narratives that depict public space as a space of danger for women (Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; Walkowitz 1992; Wilson 1991).

Daphne Spain (1992) argues that public space is gendered and that this gendering can be witnessed in "how differences in gender status result in the organization of space to reflect and reinforce . . . unequal distinctions" between genders (as cited in Macionis and Parrillo 2007, 326). This belief suggests that cities favor traditionally "male spaces" through the construction of massive sports arenas, jails, athletic facilities, courthouses, and even chambers of commerce and that, moreover, sexual harassment in public spaces disproportionately affects women, resulting in feelings of physical and emotional insecurity. Such harassment, various scholars argue, rarely affects men to the same degree as women and makes public spaces not only male-dominated, but also strongly heterosexual (Doan 2011).

"Women's lives in the city have always reflected the gender stratification of the larger society," argue Macionis and Parrillo (2007, 325). Beyond private residences or workplaces, women's zones in urban areas have been shown to be significantly narrower than that of their male counterparts, arguably due to women's limited mobility (Preston and Ustundag 2005). A woman's recreational activities must occur in geographically smaller areas than that of the typical man's, not least because of safety concerns. The geography of fear—the term employed to describe how safety concerns prevent most women from leaving or entering certain zones of the city—has long been a consideration in feminist geography studies, which examine, among other things, the activities women are reluctant to take part in, either out of fear for their physical safety or out of fear for their reputation (Koskela 1997; Valentine 1989). For example, if a well-

respected woman walks alone along a street at night, she is widely considered to have acted unwisely, either because it is unsafe for a woman to walk alone at night or because doing so provides an opportunity for people to misunderstand her motives; men, by contrast, are much more free to move about the city at will (Koskela 1997). Even what women choose to wear in public spaces carries more meaning than the sartorial choices of men, and is taken to communicate her motives. The geography of fear prevents women from utilizing the public space that is allotted to them, reflecting both the dominance of a male elite and the controlling and regulating effects of the mass media's publicity of sexual, predatory crimes targeting females in public spaces.

Much of the literature that deals with the relation of women to cities and modern urban spaces emphasizes the gendered construction of the city and the unequal distribution of city spaces between men and women. Nevertheless, there is a vast literature that deals with the ways in which women (particularly in Western cities) eventually entered and occupied city spaces. For example, in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860*, Christine Stansell (1987) documents how working-class women played a part in the thoroughgoing changes in work, family and politics in nineteenth-century New York and what new configurations of suffering and possibility city life opened up for them. While most feminist geographers and historians focus on how the city shapes women's lives, Sarah Deutsch (2002) focuses on the ways in which women shaped the city. Looking at how women from all walks of life struggled to make a place for themselves in Boston between the American Civil War and World War II, Deutsch demonstrates how they succeeded in reconfiguring the moral geography of the city.

Feminist geographers and urban sociologists have long scrutinized gender as an integral and taken-for-granted aspect of urban life, but gender-segregated spaces—a common feature of urban life—have remained curiously unexamined (Bondi and Domosh 1998; Duncan 1996; McDowell 1999; Spain 1992). There are, however, a few studies that specifically deal with gender-segregated spaces. In “The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance,” Janet Abu-Lughod (1987, 167) points to the creation of “male and female turf” as “the most important element of the structure of the city contributed by Islam” and describes these “turfs” (gender-segregated spaces) as “physically distinctive” and “visually insulated regions.” Her analysis of these spaces remains descriptive. In a more recent study, Tovi Fenster (2007, 42) focuses on the Jerusalem ultra-orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, “a place whose occupants define ‘rights to the city’ in exclusionary and religiously orthodox ways.” Mea Shearim was specifically established as a place where ultra-orthodox Jews could live completely according to their religious regulations, making it a kind of sacred space. One of the ways in which the ultra-orthodox community sacralized the neighborhood space was through the imposition of gender segregation. Fenster's analysis treats gender segregation as a practice rooted in religious fundamentalism. She highlights the negative implications of these spaces for women, especially the nondevout and secular women. By contrast, Kathryn Besio (2007), in her study of cosmopolitan women traveling to Pakistan, demonstrates how by adopting local dress and spatial segregation practices, women travelers facilitate their movement through public spaces in Pakistan, ironically reaffirming their identities as mobile and modern subjects.

Most other treatments of gender segregation, however, are entangled with the study of veiling or purdah and often explain such segregation as an exclusionary practice rooted in Islamic gender ideology and serving to maintain male dominance (see Papanek 1973). None of these studies, as far as I know, has looked at the politics around the production of such spaces.

## **Main Argument**

### *Gender-Segregated Spaces as Sites of Social Production and Diagnostics of Power*

Arguing against the reification of gender-segregated spaces, I approach these spaces as sites of an ongoing production of social relationships (Lefebvre 1992, 2009; Massey 2005, 1994). I demonstrate the historically contingent ways in which gender-segregated spaces in Iran have been produced and acquired meaning between 1979, when the Islamic Republic was established, and 2011. Taking cues from Lila Abu-Lughod's "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women" (1990), I situate gender-segregated spaces within their broader sociopolitical context to trace shifts in the complex workings of the state power.

To move away from a one-dimensional theorization of gender-segregated spaces, I analyze my case studies through a framework comprising three theoretical strands, each of which underscores a different aspect of the dynamic and historically contingent relationship between space, gender, and state power. First, following Doreen Massey (1993), I offer a "progressive sense" of gender-segregated spaces by treating them not as enclosed and static entities but as the products of social processes. These spaces and the meanings that are associated with them are never set. Rather, they are constantly in the making and thus acquire different meanings and "identities" throughout time. I demonstrate how gender segregation in Tehran shifted from the 1980s to the 2000s as what was once an exclusionary policy aimed at confining women and prohibiting their access to and presence in certain spaces of the city transformed into an inclusionary policy aimed at accommodating and facilitating women's increased presence in, and movement across, the city.

Second, adopting a Foucauldian approach to power as productive and not merely prohibitive, and building on Lefebvre's notion of space as a political product, I explore the ways in which gender-segregated spaces are interwoven with politics and relations of power. Gender-segregated spaces are not just the products of various power struggles and encounters—they set the terms for these struggles as well. Tracking the shifts in the policy about gender-segregated spaces, I argue that the Iranian state has shifted from a sovereign power that relies on prohibitive measures to a governmental power that is rationalized and relies on productive measures. Whereas gender segregation in Iran was once justified under religious terms and carried out through the Iranian state's application of prohibitive measures regulating where women should and should not be, today the Iranian state provides women-only spaces under the banner of women's rights and public health. This application of productive measures, together with the deployment of authoritative liberal discourses to "justify" and "rationalize" these gender-segregated spaces, marks the postrevolutionary transition from a sovereign to a governmental state (1995). In the case of women-only parks, I illustrate the state's shift from the prohibition of women's exercise in public parks in the name of Islamic morality to its provision of women-only parks in the name of public health. In the case of women-only buses, I show that the state shifted from confining women to the smaller space at the back of the bus in order to protect their purity in the name of Islam to providing them with women-only buses in the name of women's right to the city. I contend that the lack of an authoritative modern liberal discourse about leisure explains why this shift has not occurred in the case of soccer stadiums, access to which has continuously been denied to women.

Finally, drawing upon Bourdieu's notion of the political field (1991), I argue that it is necessary to situate the Iranian state within the web of state-society relations and the larger context of interstate relations. I attend to how the variations and contestations within the political

field relate to the dynamics of gender-segregated spaces, the logic of governmentality, and shifts in the Iranian state’s power. In other words, I demonstrate how the Iranian state and its shift from prohibitive measures to productive ones can be explained by analyzing local and global politics.

**Table 1.** General overview of shift from prohibitive to productive state power

	<b>1980s Prohibition</b>	<b>2000s Provision</b>
<b>WOMEN-ONLY PARKS</b>	<p><b>Segregation</b> as an exclusionary practice aimed at limiting women’s outdoor exercise, carried out under Islamic terms.</p> <p><b>Women</b> as moral subjects.</p> <p><b>State</b> as the prohibitor.</p>	<p><b>Segregation</b> as an inclusionary practice aimed at providing women with exercise spaces, carried out under liberal secular discourses of women’s health and the right to the city.</p> <p><b>Women</b> as citizens entitled to their own spaces.</p> <p><b>State</b> as the provider of (alternative) space.</p>
<b>GENDER- SEGREGATED BUSES</b>	<p><b>Segregation</b> as an exclusionary practice aimed at limiting women’s bus ridership to one-third of the bus space, carried out under Islamic terms.</p> <p><b>Women</b> as moral subjects.</p> <p><b>State</b> as the prohibitor.</p>	<p><b>Segregation</b> as an inclusionary practice aimed at accommodating the increase in female bus ridership, carried out under liberal secular discourses of women’s right to the city and to safety.</p> <p><b>Women</b> as citizens entitled to their own spaces.</p> <p><b>State</b> as the provider of (alternative) space.</p>
<b>MEN-ONLY SPORTS STADIUMS</b>	<p><b>Segregation</b> as an exclusionary practice aimed at prohibiting women’s sports spectatorship, carried out under Islamic terms.</p> <p><b>Women</b> as moral subjects.</p> <p><b>State</b> as the prohibitor.</p>	<p><b>Segregation</b> as an exclusionary practice aimed at prohibiting women’s sports spectatorship, carried out under liberal secular discourses of citizenship and state provision of security, and offering alternative notions of equality.</p> <p><b>Women</b> as citizens whose protection is the state’s responsibility.</p> <p><b>State</b> as a failed provider.</p>

*Space as Social Product*

“Space is social,” argues Lefebvre (2009, 186). It is not just a container that gives shape to the social relations within it, but the product of those very social relations. Echoing Foucault’s take on the significance of space in the context of modern governmentality and its production of modern subjects (1995), Lefebvre (2009, 210) argues that modern urban governmentality consists of the spatial partitioning of social life based on a “threefold schema”: “homogeneity, in which space is reduced to equivalency; fragmentation, in which social relations are divided and differentiated; and hierarchization, in which discrete spaces are distinguished and delineated from one another.” Individuals and institutions alike possess “appropriate” spaces within society,

and are expected to adapt and respond to the codes that inform and regulate their being in these spaces. Disciplinary power, then, takes on a spatial form, which runs through individuals and become part of their everyday life and common sense. The ways urban space is homogenized, fragmented, assigned to different individuals and institutions, and hierarchized, is ultimately dependent on the constellations of power at each particular moment.

This reciprocity highlights a number of ways in which, to use Massey's language (1993), a "progressive" take on place might be developed. First, space is not a static container of social relations but rather a product of them. It is an ensemble of social links and connections. If we take into account that social relations are not motionless but are dynamic and constantly shifting, then we must accept that this dynamism will be reflected in the physicality of spaces, which are at once producing and produced by these relations. A critical analysis of urban spaces, here of gender-segregated spaces, should take into account this dynamism and avoid treating social spaces as static and frozen in time. They should be studied as social processes that are never concluded.

Second, if we treat spaces as processes and not as enclosed entities, then they clearly do not have single, unique identities; despite the facade of homogeneity and harmony, they are multivalent and full of internal conflicts (Lefebvre 2009). In this interpretation, "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (Massey 1994, 154). The space might appear to stay intact, but it is never the same space. It is constantly imbued with new meanings, new "identities," and as such serves different purposes throughout time.

Thus, it becomes crucial to figure out exactly what meanings are associated with certain places at each particular time. Women-only parks, segregated buses, and men-only sports stadiums are all the products of the gender segregation policies of the Islamic Republic. However, as I demonstrate in this study, the meanings of these spaces and the purposes that they serve have changed across the past three decades. In the cases of women-only parks and buses, the move toward an inclusionary gender segregation policy that accommodates women's increased public presence is at least partially the result of the problems created by the exclusionary gender segregation policy that limited women's movements in public spaces. In this way, the changing purpose and signification of gender-segregated spaces function as a window into the transformation of the state that produces these spaces.

### *Space as Political Product*

Lefebvre (2009, 33) famously stated: "There is a politics of space because space is political." Scholars have widely documented how power is enacted on space: power presents itself by assigning different individuals and institutions to particular spaces (Domosh and Seager 2001; Woodward 2002), by setting the rules for socially accepted forms of behavior within various spaces (Gardner 1995), and by the uneven distribution of space and the access to it (Harvey 2000). Space also functions as an instrument of power. In his work on the role of prisons, Foucault discusses how the prison space, designed in the form of a panopticon, was used initially to exclude the criminal from society and later to discipline him (Foucault 1995). Similarly, Gramsci (1971) has demonstrated how under Fordism, the factory space was designed for routinized and intensified labor in order to increase production.

The modern state uses space in its efforts to control and regulate social relations among its constituencies (Lefebvre 2009; Crampton and Elden 2007). Each new form of state and

political power introduces its own particular way of partitioning space and its own administrative discourses about space and the things and people within it. One of the most important aspects of state-formation processes is the way in which the state binds itself to space. As Foucault highlights, the production of space is an important dimension of the exercise of power and a vital part of the challenge to gain control of the population (Foucault 1995).

The critical points in the shifts in the Iranian state's modality of power from sovereign to governmental are at the heart of this examination. Together, the three case studies of women-only parks, gender-segregated busing, and men-only sports stadiums serve as a prism that allows us to identify the different ways in which the Iranian state reconstitutes itself by reconfiguring space along gender lines.

### *Spatial Dynamics and the Political Field*

As Lefebvre points out, "If space is produced, if there is a productive process, then we are dealing with history" (2009, 46). The uniqueness of each space has its roots in the unique history of that space's productive forces. In addition to being produced by social relations that are themselves geographically and historically differentiated, spaces are also, as many scholars have demonstrated, "the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world" (Massey 1993, 71). In order to examine these "linkages, both local and to the wider world" in the context of gender-segregated spaces in Tehran, I draw on Bourdieu's notion of the field as defined by Zimmermann and Favell (2011, 497):

A field can be described as a hierarchical space of social relations where actors (individuals, groups, states, etc.) struggle to obtain certain resources (so-called capital, e.g. influence, authority, etc.) in relation to certain spheres of social life (the economy, politics, education, etc.). The position of each actor in a given field is determined through the networks of relations this actor entertains with the other elements in the field.

I develop a new analytic framework in the context of the topic of gender segregation in Iran that takes into account two types of fields. The first is the discursive field within which various discourses circulate. I show how global liberal discourses and practices (regarding health, women's right to the city, and the like) can incite change at the local level and can be appropriated for conservative state-formation purposes. The second is the political field where different political agents strive for political capital in order to influence the policy process and to monopolize the legitimate means of manipulating their own social world (Kauppi 2003, 779). While not discounting the effect of Islamic ideologies on the Iranian state's gender segregation policies, I argue that an exclusive focus on the religious aspect of the policies overlooks changes in international and national environments that have influenced the Iranian state's spatial policies. This research project will thereby help explain the extent to which aspects of state practice define and mediate the place of Islam itself. In other words, Islam in this examination is not treated as a fixed, predetermined category. It is rather defined as a category whose articulation depends on the articulation of the state's other discourses and interests.

I thus argue that sociological analyses of the discursive and political fields, rather than the more common cultural analysis of the ideological motivations underpinning these policies, are essential if we are to better understand the dynamics of both gender-segregated spaces and the Iranian state in the past three decades. I want to make one simple point here: the production of gender-segregated spaces can be illuminated by a critical analysis of the politics around the

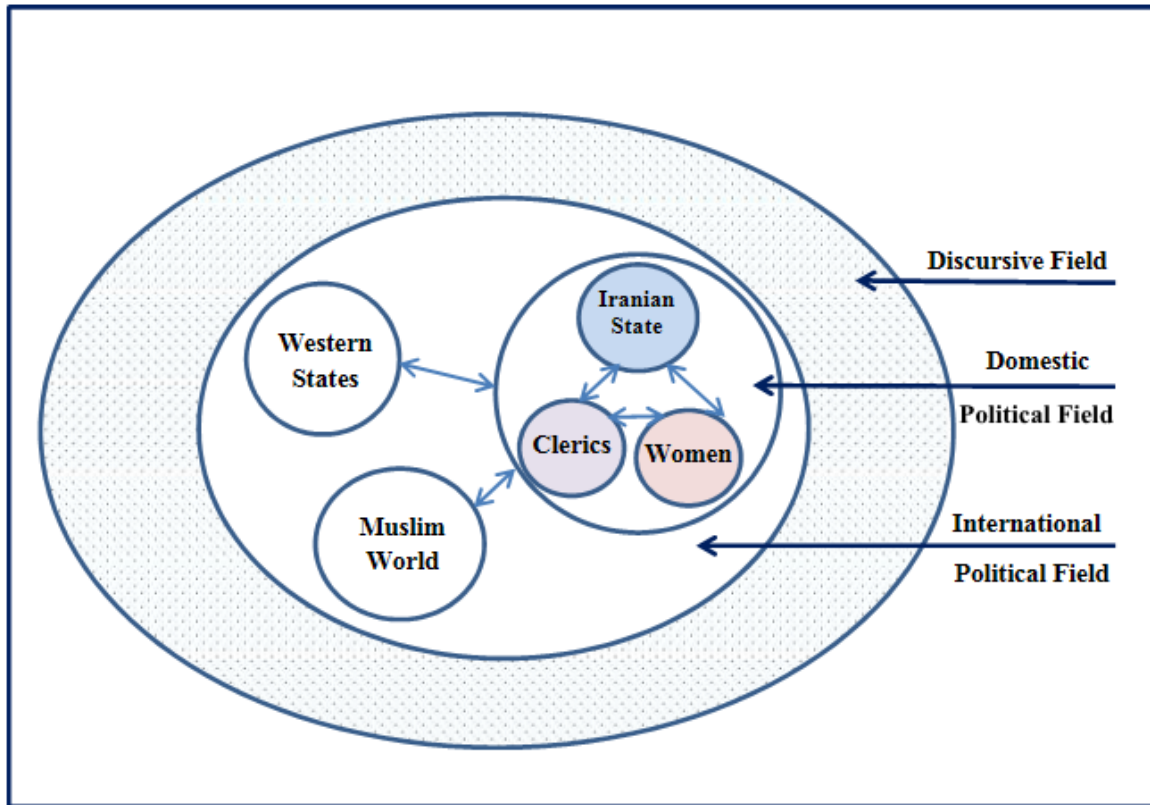
scalar organization of these spaces. As Foucault (149) has suggested, the history of space is at the same time the history of power, which encompasses not only geopolitics but also the “little tactics of the habitat.”

Given this framework, I scrutinize the micro-level processes of the state’s operation: how it makes decisions and how it encounters the “woman’s question” both at the domestic level and at the international level, where it is locked in an ever-changing interstate system. I am interested in finding out how these local and global factors are mediated through the state and how they affect the processes of spatial policy formation and implementation. I therefore treat the Iranian state’s spatial policies as the outcomes of political struggles, which are shaped by the interplay of different discourses, the interaction of different branches within the state, and the pressures of national and international forces.

I likewise conceptualize the Iranian state itself as an institution situated in the broader context of historically changing national and transnational forces. At the domestic level, I focus not only on the internal rivalry among different branches of the state, but also on state-society relations. I focus particularly on how the Iranian state’s spatial policies are constrained by its interactions with the clerics on the one hand, and with women on the other hand. In other words, the Iranian state does not function in a vacuum, nor is it in a position to unilaterally impose its agenda on society. At the international level, I argue that the Iranian state’s aspiration to become the hegemon of the “Muslim world” and its attempt to produce its own domain of sovereignty amid the “hostile” geopolitics of the time have implications for how the state grapples with the “woman’s question” and how it mediates demands raised by different national and international groupings.

In order to explain the spatial dynamics and the political shifts that they index, I study the links between the structures of both the discursive and the political fields and the shifts in the gender segregation policies of the Iranian state.





**Figure 1.** Mapping the discursive and the domestic and international political fields

The fact of relationality and embeddedness raises serious issues for the interpretation of the dynamics of gender-segregated spaces in Iran. I do not mean in any way to minimize the role and effectiveness of the Iranian state and its Islamism in the production of gender-segregated spaces. Nevertheless, I maintain that the ultimate shape and meaning of these spaces are the product of not just the Iranian state but also the political field within which it is situated. The Iranian state does produce gender-segregated spaces, but they do not make it make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances they inherit from the past as well as influenced by the contemporary constellations of power at both local and global levels.

### **Dissertation Overview**

This dissertation consists of three chapters corresponding to the three case studies, followed by a conclusion that looks at what the Iranian case can tell us about the global surge in gender segregated spaces.

Chapter 1, “The Mother’s Paradise: Women-Only Parks and the Dynamics of State Power,” offers a thorough account of the formation of the first women-only park in Tehran—the Mothers’ Paradise. Through engaging with George Steinmetz’s (1999) notion of state formation as an ongoing process and Foucault’s (2008, 2007, 1995, 1980) notion of governmentality, I develop a conceptual framework for the development of the Mothers’ Paradise park that allows me to explore how the Islamic Republic of Iran, which thirty years ago considered women’s outdoor exercise a problem, or even un-Islamic, now promotes it as a solution to women’s health problems. While the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran in 2004 was seen as a step toward the reinforcement of the Islamic aspect of the state at the expense of its

republican aspect, I contend that the expansion of women-only parks marks not a “return to religion” but rather a move toward what Asef Bayat (1996) calls “post-Islamism.” By tracking the shifts in gender-segregated spaces, I track the shifts in Iranian state power from a sovereign state power that relies on prohibitive measures to a governmental state power that is rationalized and relies on productive measures.

In chapter 2, “Ideologies in Motion: Gender-Segregated Busing and the Right to the City,” I offer an account of developments in the project of gender segregation on Tehran’s buses. I demonstrate how contrary to common understanding, gender-segregated spaces in Tehran shifted from functioning as spaces of exclusion that restricted women’s movements in the city to spaces of inclusion that facilitated their presence in an otherwise male-dominated urban space. In the 1980s, women were confined to smaller spaces at the back of buses in order to protect their purity in the name of Islam, but by the 2000s, the state was providing women-only buses in the name of women’s right to the city.

In chapter 3, “Access to Freedom Denied! The Ban on Women’s Sports Spectatorship and the Politics of Soccer,” I analyze developments around the ban on women’s spectatorship of men’s sports and their exclusion from the space of Tehran’s Freedom Stadium. I demonstrate how the ban, which was a non-issue during the 1980s, became problematic during the late 1990s and how struggles to remove or maintain the ban were less about women and more about different groups’ attempt to maintain their authority/power in the political field. This power, however, expressed itself in the form of regulating women’s public presence. Contrary to the first two cases, this case looks at what factors contribute to the failure of the state to provide women with access to stadium space.

In the conclusion, “The Global Turn to Gender Segregation,” I shift the focus from Iran to the recent surge in gender segregation practices across the globe. For example, in Mexico women-only Pink Taxis have been introduced to curb sexual harassment, and in the United Kingdom, Mum’s Taxis give women the choice of a female driver at night and help mothers with school drop-offs; meanwhile in Canada, entrepreneurs are toying with the idea of establishing women-only taxis and consider the growing Muslim community to be their “target market.” I suggest that further study is needed to explore the relationship between women and modern urban spaces, and the spatial strategies that govern their bodies and public presence in urban spaces across the globe.

## Chapter 1

### “The Mothers’ Paradise”: Women-Only Parks and the Dynamics of State Power

Up on the Abbas Abad hills in northeast Tehran is the Mothers’ Paradise, one of the city’s 1,357 parks and the first of its four women-only parks. The park is reserved exclusively for women every day except Fridays, when it is open to families.<sup>5</sup> Founded in 2007, the Mothers’ Paradise spreads over an area of about thirty-seven acres. Women are not banned from attending mixed parks, but their presence in these parks—like in all other public spaces—is conditional upon their donning the veil. In the Mothers’ Paradise, in the absence of men, women are allowed to take off their veils and wear the clothing of their choice.<sup>6</sup> They come in groups or as individuals. Everyone finds a way to amuse themselves in the Mothers’ Paradise. The park is equipped with fitness machines, a daycare center, a playground, a three-mile bike trail, a library, a health center, picnic areas, and chess tables. An all-female staff of more than seventy employees runs the park. They landscape and garden, collect trash and clean, rent out bikes, conduct group exercises, and maintain and manage the grounds. Female guards hired by the Iranian police department maintain security inside the park, and two male guards monitor the entrance to ensure that no man can enter the park or harass women outside the entrance. Park usage is high “and the number of visitors is increasing,” the manager of the park tells me. Schools treat the park as a space for extracurricular activities,<sup>7</sup> while district municipalities and government organizations use the park to treat their female staff to occasional picnics and exercise retreats.

Inside the Mothers’ Paradise, I see young schoolgirls enthusiastically climbing trees, their pink school uniforms and white head-scarves hung on the branches. They remind me of the scene in *The Sound of Music* where Captain Von Trapp, upon his return from a trip with his fiancée, finds his children swinging on branches in a tree-lined street, singing and screaming with joy—an expression of physical release from the captain’s authoritative parenting. In the Mothers’ Paradise, a group of middle-aged housewives have spread a large picnic rug on the grass next to the fountains. One of them, Mrs. Akbari, tells me that they (she, her friends, and neighbors) come here often. “With no man around,” she tells me, “this park *is* a paradise!” They spread their picnic rugs on the grass and stay there for hours. “We do different things: talk, gossip, sleep, exercise. I sometime even chop and rinse herbs (*sabzi pak kardan*) here!” Her children—a son and a daughter—are “old enough” and “are busy with their own lives.” She tells me that with her “children spending most of their time with friends” and a husband “spending most of his time at work” she easily gets bored at home: “It’s a small house, you know!”

While Mrs. Akbari and her friends are enjoying their picnic, or “herb chopping-and-rinsing session,” a group of retired high-school teachers are sitting in a circle listening to an older woman recite poems by Hafez. On the other side of the park, a few meters from the monument that commemorates women martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), a group of high-school girls

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<sup>5</sup> Friday is the weekend in Iran.

<sup>6</sup> Veiling in Iran is compulsory by law. All women (of any religion or nationality) must cover their hair and wear some type of outer garment over their clothes when appearing in public.

<sup>7</sup> School is gender-segregated (most universities are coed). Uniforms are required in most boys’ schools and in all girls’ schools. The girls’ uniform consists of a long dress and head-scarf (bright colors in elementary, darker colors in junior high and high school). According to Islam, women are supposed to cover their head and body in the presence of unrelated men, but despite the absence of males, schoolgirls must remain covered while at school. The rationale given is that it is difficult to keep the prying eyes of men away, and that the practice of veiling should become a habit through continuity.

are celebrating their friend's birthday. After eating birthday cake, the girls bring the world to their private corner with the help of a cell phone: they turn on the phone's MP3 player and the sound of Los Angeles-produced Persian pop music (formally banned in Iran) fills the air—"Khanum del beh to bastam/ del-e hama ro shekastam." The schoolgirls dance to all the prohibited tunes. The female guards, the only women who—as the representatives of the state—are still covered in their Islamic hijab, are approaching. I worry that they will confiscate the girls' cell phones, that they might give the girls a sharp warning, that they might ruin the birthday party. My fears, rooted in my own childhood experiences in the 1980s, appear to be baseless; the guards pass by them without so much as a glance. "The guards in the women-only parks are there to provide women with security, with protection," one of the guards tells me. The guards represent the state as the provider of protection for women.

In their public statements, city and government officials alleged that the state provided parks to women out of a concern for women's health problems that arose from lack of fresh air and exercise. Yet in the 1980s, immediately after the Iranian revolution, women's outdoor exercise was seen as a problem—unnecessary, even un-Islamic, and thus prohibited. This chapter explores how the Iranian state came to see women-only parks as a solution to women's health problems. Today, the Iranian state not only coordinates women's group exercises in mixed parks, but also provides women with a green space of their own: one women-only park in each district of Tehran. This chapter examines what shifts in the politics of gender segregation can tell us about modes of state governance.

In this chapter, I bring the Iranian state into mainstream sociology by dispelling the comfortably accepted assumption about the definitive role that Islam plays in the formation of the Iranian state's policies. I also move beyond the view of Iranian state power as essentially a system of sovereign projects and policies backed by force, and flesh out the more positive and productive side of its power—that is, its power to produce new subjects, spaces, discourses, and practices.

I contend that analyses that reduce gender segregation to a state project of Islamic (and therefore, ideological) dimensions tell us little about actual shifts in Iranian state power. I treat the creation of the Mothers' Paradise as an archive of the formation of the Iranian state that reveals the shifts in state power from authoritarian sovereignty in the 1980s to disciplinary governmentality in the 2000s. The Mothers' Paradise signifies the end point of a process in which the Iranian state, through dealing with the question of women's leisure and exercise activities in the parks, has moved away from governance through the application of prohibitive measures toward the use of productive ones. The state still attempts to demarcate space and control women's bodily movements, but in this more productive mode, it does so by directing activity within defined spaces, rather than instating a blanket prohibition, and by using a discourse that permeates both the state and society and that justifies gender segregation as a response to health problems and not as a requirement for an Islamic order.

Engaging with George Steinmetz's notion of state formation as an ongoing process (1999) and Foucault's analytic of power, particularly his notion of governmentality (2008, 2007, 1995, 1980), I develop a conceptual framework for my narrative of the formation of the Mothers' Paradise. The narrative is organized around three modalities of state power and the logics that shape the state's approach to women's outdoor exercise: prohibition, coordination, and provision. Here, I highlight the tensions and contradictions that result from the state's embeddedness in discursive circuits of both local and global culture and politics.

## **State Formation, Power, and Governmentality**

In *State/Culture: State Formation after the Cultural Turn*, George Steinmetz (1999) suggests that “state formation is a long and ongoing process of structural change” that is never concluded (see also Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Day 2002; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Ong 2006). Instead of treating state formation as an event that has already occurred, he characterizes states as constantly transforming entities that are “shot through with circuits of meaning that cut across the state-society frontier” (Steinmetz 1999, 12). Taking heed of the insights Steinmetz offers, I move away from the conceptualization of the formation of the Iranian state as an event that took place on 1 April 1979, and instead look at it as a constant process whose ultimate product is contingent upon broader temporal and societal configurations (such as economy, politics, and culture) occurring at both the domestic and international levels. In order to understand the processes of state formation in Iran, especially in relation to the development of gender-segregation policies, I engage with a Foucauldian analytic of power.

Instead of treating the state as a power that is separate from society and stands above and beyond it, as is the case with (neo-)Marxist and (neo-)Weberian approaches (Block 1987; Evans 1995; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Jessop 1990; Migdal, Kohli, and Shue 1994; Wolfe 1974), the Foucauldian framework emphasizes governmentality, which is the exercise of power at a distance and through (not on) individuals (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1993; Dean 1999; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Miller and Rose 1990; Mitchell 2005; Ong 2006; Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006).

In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault (1995) was interested not just in the differences between the subjects of sovereign and disciplinary power, but also in figuring out how this shift from sovereign to disciplinary power occurred in the first place and how this shift made power more economical and effective. Here, I focus on what the application of productive measures, or the turn to governmentality, does to/for Iranian state power. I therefore apply the following questions to the particular case of Iran: How do shifts in modalities of state power take place? And what conditions enable these shifts?

This study engages Foucault’s notion of power in three ways. First, Foucault dismisses the Marxist view of the state as essentially oppressive and instead differentiates between negative and positive dimensions of power. According to Foucault, power should not be conceived of in negative terms as something that represses, excludes, refuses, prohibits, disables, and says “no”—in short as a prohibitive mechanism. In fact, what makes power effective is its ability to produce spaces, ideas, concepts, and categories (Foucault 1995, 194). Foucault’s main aim is to turn the negative conception of power as a prohibitive mechanism on its head, emphasizing power as a productive mechanism rather than as a force that bears down on individuals by saying “no.” Foucault conceives of productive power as a force that runs through the whole social body (Foucault 1991, 1995; McHoul and Grace 1993).

Second, the prohibitive and productive dimensions of power correspond to two distinct forms of state power: sovereign and governmental. Sovereign power appears in the form of control over a territory, while governmentality appears in the form of control over the inhabitants of that territory. While sovereign power is founded on transcendental rule, whether a cosmological model, or a moral ideal, governmentality finds its rationale in the welfare of its subjects. Indeed, governmentality, in further contrast to sovereign power, lies in the state’s ability to rationalize its power, to enable certain problems and offer certain strategies for solving those problems regarding the well-being of its population (Foucault 2007; Lemke 2001). Governmentality is partially about utilizing concrete “realities” to shape a problem-space to

which power has the solution. In contrast to sovereign power, governmentality not only produces and disciplines subjects but also invests even in what represents its failures to do so. That is, undisciplined bodies can still be mobilized to effectively demonstrate the necessity of the disciplining power (Foucault 1980, 195–96). In this case, the Iranian state uses the “unhealthy” bodies of Iranian women—allegedly the result of compulsory veiling—to justify the need for the opening of women-only parks. The undisciplined subjects of Iranian women with their unhealthy bodies come to simultaneously signify the failure and the success of the system.

Third, following Foucault I look at the dynamics of power and analyze the sociohistorical processes that enabled the passage from sovereignty to governmentality. But whereas Foucault’s (1991) analysis of the sociohistorical processes that blocked the emergence of governmentality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and facilitated its mobilization in the eighteenth century takes into account only the internal dynamics of power, I argue that modern state power—including that of the Islamic Republic of Iran—cannot be studied as a singularity detached from the global and transnational context within which it is embedded. Following John Meyer (1999), I treat state power as “devolving from a global (political) culture.” “Culture,” Meyer argues, “is less a set of values and norms, and more a set of cognitive models defining the nature, purpose, resources, technologies, controls and sovereignty of the proper nation-states” (1999, 123). Meyer (1980, 48) points out that national elites around the world increasingly adopt “world ideologies” (what I refer to as global liberal discourses), a practice that leads to an increasing similarity among the “categories of social problems” that various states “recognize as warranting intervention” (Steinmetz 1999, 31). Thus, the Iranian state officials presented the women-only parks not as a site of Islamic governance, but as a solution to globally recognized health problems. The Mothers’ Paradise represents multiple layers of historically shifting factors. By situating the Mothers’ Paradise in the broader sociopolitical context within which it was produced, I peel back these layers and reveal the processes that have enabled the production of this park.

## **Women’s Outdoor Exercise from Problem to Solution**

### *The State as the Prohibitor*

During the 1979 revolution and the early 1980s, while the Islamic Republic consolidated its political rule at home and fought a territorial war on the international front, leisure sports came to be considered unnecessary and un-Islamic. Hassan Ghafourifard, the former governor of Tehran, recalled in a 1986 interview that “in such an atmosphere, when I was the governor of Tehran, I remember someone called and asked me if playing volleyball was haram [religiously forbidden]. . . . Sports were considered haram or at best a form of boisterous carousing” (*Zan e Rooz* 7 March 1986).

Women’s sports and leisure-time activities especially were seen as morally decadent and therefore were considered unnecessary. The regime’s main concern with regard to women was to craft pious mothers; the question of women’s leisure and/or physical exercise was addressed in a prohibitive way, by determining where women could not go and what they could not do. The dominant view was that in an Islamic public order, the home should be valorized as the woman’s place, unless the “common good” required women to step out to show their support for the new regime. Shahla Habibi, Iran’s presidential adviser of women’s affairs in the 1990s, recalled in her interview with me how difficult it was to get officials, such as Ghafourifard himself, to support women’s sports and make them less of a taboo by speaking in public about them.

Issues from that period of *Zan e Rooz* magazine, founded in 1964 and one of the oldest women's weeklies in Iran, provide a window onto the atmosphere of public parks in those days. Its reports suggest that under such circumstances women's outdoor exercise in the parks had turned into a stressful activity. The news of a potential ban on women's outdoor exercise in the parks had made women anxious. One of the male instructors had asked women to "respect the authorities" and "conduct their exercises indoors" in the gyms. But women wanted "fresh air" and not the "smelly" environment of the Hijab Complex (the only women's indoor sports complex in those days) (ibid.). Their daily exercise was, therefore, often carried out under the suspicious gaze of male government guards, who would monitor their activities to make sure that no rule was breached and that their moves were in accordance with the Islamic codes and not provocative. Furthermore, the ban, or the threat of it, had discouraged many women from going to the parks to run and exercise, whether alone or with groups of friends. A 1989 *Zan e Rooz* reported that one of the exercise instructors pointed out that over the three-year period from 1985 to 1988, the number of women attending his sessions had reached 150. "However," he stated, "over a period of three days, since the newspapers spread the rumor of the ban, one hundred of them have opted out."

Ghafourifard also suggested that new social restrictions had made it necessary for the state to build indoor exercise and sports facilities for women: "In general three tasks should be carried out before women are able to exercise: (1) erase the negative image of women's sports which has been inherited from the previous regime, (2) avoid extremist behavior [fundamentalism], (3) provide women with necessary sports facilities" (*Zan e Rooz* 7 March 1986). But women could not wait until these three conditions were fulfilled, and, as the national budget was spent mostly on the war with Iraq, there was little indication that these tasks would be completed any time soon. Thus, in the 1980s, despite frequent warnings and interruptions by the guards, those women who were enthusiastic about outdoor group exercise, although still few in number, would go to the parks or to enclosed public spaces such as the green spaces of large residential complexes to silently and secretly perform their morning exercises. "After all, the government guards could not be in all places all the time," states Zahra, one of my interviewees. Zahra's comment evidences both the costly and limiting nature of the prohibitive measures.

#### *The State as the Coordinator (Failed Provision)*

In the 1990s, with the termination of the eight-year war with Iraq, the reconstruction era began, under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani (see Hunter 1989; Karshenas and Pesaran 1995). With the appointment<sup>8</sup> in 1990 of Gholamhossein Karbaschi as the mayor of Tehran, the city embarked on a path to growth and development (see Adelkhah 2000). The new mayor of Tehran was well aware of the fact that, with the diminishing of revolutionary zeal in the postwar reconstruction era, something other than the revolution and war monuments was needed for the citizenry to develop a sense of belonging to the city. Tehran was a city that had mourned for eight years over its soldiers' corpses, a city populated by black-cloaked citizens, a city with a background music of jets and explosions. But Tehran gradually transformed into a city of parks and flowers, of festivals and fountains. The state had consolidated its rule over the Iranian territory and was now more concerned about its control over the inhabitants of this territory.

Through the municipality's efforts, both the appearance of the city and its relationship to its inhabitants were transformed. The cult of citizenship and "the right to the city" were

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<sup>8</sup> Up until 1999, the mayor was appointed by the Ministry of Interior. In 1999, Iran held its first-ever elections to the city and village councils. Since then, the city councils have been responsible for electing the mayor.

promoted. “Our City, Our Home!” was a slogan used by the mayor to generate a sense of belonging to, respect for, and entitlement to the city. Our city, like our home, had to be made comfortable for all the members of the big family of Tehranis, the city’s citizens. Therefore, while the conservative faction of the state continued to push for the adoption of prohibitive measures, the municipality, with the backing of Rafsanjani as the president, leaned toward the application of productive measures by opening up the urban space to different sectors of society. In his 1996 report for the *Independent*, Robert Fisk writes about Tehran’s “tree-loving mayor” and his “taste for democracy.”<sup>9</sup> He points to the opening of the unisex cycle tracks in Tehran’s Chitgar Park and the space they provide for the city’s teenagers “to meet outside the suffocating rules” of the morality patrols. Yet he is quick to note a sign erected on the cycle path that reads: “Women are forbidden to ride bicycles on the path. . . . Violators will be prosecuted.”

Significantly, while elements of governmentality were present in this period, they could not be fully mobilized as the dominant mode of state governance. This was mainly due to the tensions and conflicts within and between different state apparatuses, which, as many have pointed out, have been there since the inception of the new regime (Arjomand 2009; Keshavarzian 2005; Siavoshi 1992; Takeyh 2006). Arjomand (2009) specifically points to the emergence of hard-liner and reformist factions as a result of revolutionary power struggles in the post-Khomeini era.<sup>10</sup> During the early 1990s, the state faced several contradictions to manage. While local governments were preoccupied with the citizens’ attachment to the city, the central government was planning a turn toward a free market economy. Following World Bank–inspired structural adjustment policies, Rafsanjani’s goal was to renew the country’s ties with the world and develop an economy that was well integrated into the global economy. Advocating a free market economy might have been helpful in temporarily saving Iran from a postwar economic crisis; nevertheless, like many other state projects and policies, it produced undesired effects as well. Opening the domestic market to consumer imports as part of the liberalization of the economy (and as a salve to a war-deprived population) also brought unintended consequences along the lines of what Ayatollah Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic Republic, labeled “cultural invasion” (Arjomand 2009, 177–78). Western (cultural) products had “invaded” the domestic market through widespread informal and black-market networks. These “alarming” social developments generated a sense of urgency among some state officials to advocate for the expansion of public spaces and spheres. Some realized that the state could no longer rely merely on prohibition and the banning of Western cultural products (as the new technologies had made it difficult and costly to monitor each and all individuals); these officials advocated that instead, the state should produce alternative (cultural) products and spaces.

It was at this time that the idea of women-only parks first came into being. In 1993, the Presidential Center of Women’s Affairs and Participation, led by Shahla Habibi, pushed Tehran Municipality to convert the seventy-five-acre Taleghani Park into a women-only park so that “women could exercise in open air with their gym clothes and without the veil” (*Zan e Rooz* 11 June 1993). The rationale the municipality offered for providing alternative spaces of leisure and exercise was the importance of directing attention away from the infiltrating Western cultural goods and preventing the consumption patterns associated with such goods. “Since the Western countries do everything in their capacity to corrupt [our] youth,” said Shahla Habibi in an

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Fisk, “Tehran’s Tree-Loving Mayor Has a Taste for Democracy,” *Independent*, 18 March 1996, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/tehrans-treeloving-mayor-has-a-taste-for-democracy-1342714.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was the leader of the 1979 revolution. Following the success of the revolution, he became the country’s supreme leader. He died on 3 June 1989 and was succeeded by Ali Khamenei.



interview with *Zan e Rooz*, “the lack of healthy sports and entertainment facilities could have dangerous implications for our youth and teenagers” (ibid.). Here, we see the emergence of a discourse that refers to women’s exercise not as a problem but as a solution to the problems associated with the “Western cultural invasion.” The importance of physical exercise for women’s health is only introduced as an afterthought. In the same interview, Habibi refers to the opening of women-only parks and similar acts as a necessity; she highlights the implications of such acts for the mental and physical health of the population, and invites women to show their support for such projects by attending the park and using its facilities.

But as Habibi explained in my 2009 interview with her, the project initially suffered from poor advertising and a lack of cooperation from other state organizations. The municipality did not fully convert the park into a women-only park; instead it implemented the necessary security measures to reserve the park exclusively for women only on Saturdays,<sup>11</sup> Mondays, and Wednesdays from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. The project was a failure not just because other state institutions did not cooperate, but also because, despite Habibi’s call, women showed absolutely no interest in using the space. Jane Fonda Workout videos had just found their way into the houses of the well-to-do families, and aerobics and physical exercise had not yet become popular. Thus, Taleghani Park was deserted on women-only days. Soon the empty space was reclaimed by men, leaving the park as an example of the state’s failed attempt to create a women-only park in the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, during the same period Habibi had also expressed hope that the parks of all districts in Tehran would allocate a specific space for women’s sports and exercise activities, and this call created a chain of activities in district municipalities. As a result, district municipalities became equipped with women’s sports offices, which were mostly responsible for organizing and coordinating women’s morning and group exercises, now conducted under the supervision of female instructors in public parks, where women, still observing their hijab, could do aerobics and stretching exercises—something unimaginable a decade earlier. This is important, as it paved the way for women’s increased ability to claim their own space of authority in the years that followed. Although, as one of these female instructors indicated in my interview with her, women who attended these events were mostly middle-aged housewives, the women’s sports offices did a good job of spreading the news and promoting group exercise in the parks. The outdoor exercise sessions organized by district municipalities had turned into elaborate events, often accompanied by competitions, prize drawings, food, and other festivities.

Women’s morning exercises and competitions in public parks were no longer policed by the state, but rather organized by it. In other words, the state managed to bring under its wing that part of everyday life that had lived and grown outside the permitted zones. As the state started to (re)shape the public space to facilitate women’s presence, it simultaneously increased its grip over previously unregulated spaces of everyday life. The state in this way exercised a more effective form of power that was focused more on regulation than prohibition, and was more concerned with the enabling of desired practices than with the disabling of undesired ones. The story of the gradual (re)opening of the space for women, therefore, is the story of the gradual (re)orientation of state power.

### *The State as the Provider*

With the election of Mohammad Khatami, the reformist candidate, in the 1996 presidential elections, the reform era (1996–2004) began. This period was characterized by the state’s move

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<sup>11</sup> Saturdays are not a part of the weekend in Iran.

toward political liberalization, as opposed to the economic liberalization of the previous era (see Behdad 2001; Boroujerdi 2004; Khajehpour 2002). Khatami was less interested in economic policy, but since that was still controlled by other factions, economic liberalization did continue. In this era, two decades after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the problems related to and/or caused by the earlier state projects and national trends started to surface.

A postrevolution population spike, which peaked in the eighties, meant that there was an enormous baby boom generation growing up, whose families expected to be provided with opportunities for health and education. For this younger population, the revolution and the war were nothing but vague memories or history depicted in family albums and movies. At the same time, the global commercialization of Western leisure products and practices had put Iran in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the West in what was termed the “cultural war.” The loosening attachment to the revolutionary and religious ideals and values thus turned into one of the greatest concerns of the state. “Bad hijabs” (young women who were lax in maintaining their Islamic hijab) came to be seen as a sign of this detachment, or so it was interpreted by the state, foreign observers, and even social science scholars. Official governmental reports listed factors responsible for the expansion of “morally corrupt networks”: unemployment; the “marriage crisis” (the increasing age of marriage for both men and women, caused at least in part by the increasing expense of beginning a new household); and the lack of cultural, sports, and entertainment spaces and facilities (see the High Council of Iranian Youths Collection of Bills 2009).<sup>12</sup>

After two decades of unsuccessful attempts to reinforce bans on Western (cultural) products, different factions within the state acknowledged the need for the provision of alternative spaces, even if in the name of “cultural defense.” They unanimously agreed on what the problem was: a lack of conviviality, entertainment, and sports facilities (*Salam* 12 February 1999; *Ettelaat* 23 February 1999; *Resalat* 16 April 2003). Different policy-making institutions and organizations with different political affiliations<sup>13</sup> passed bills or designed proposals demanding the allocation of sufficient funds and resources for the organization and facilitation of leisure-time activities for both women and youths. Despite their agreement on the problem, there were different ideas of how to respond. For example, although both reformists and the conservatives agreed on the necessity of the expansion of women-only spaces, the reformists saw this as a way to “expand” women’s spaces while the conservatives formulated it as the “regulation” of women’s access to public space. Nevertheless, the outcome was the same: there would be an expansion of women-only spaces. Within this atmosphere, the idea of women-only parks was revived.

On 17 May 2004, *Ettelaat*, one of Tehran’s leading daily newspapers, published a news story questioning the postponement of the construction of women-only parks and pointed to a 2000 report published by the “social and cultural experts” at the Education and Training Organization of Tehran (hereafter ETO), which contained information about schoolgirls’ poor health conditions. The report suggested that due to their lack of access to sports facilities and thus their lack of physical activity, schoolgirls were suffering from various bone and joint diseases. This, the report suggested, was partially the outcome of the state’s earlier project of

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<sup>12</sup> “List of Bills Passed by Public Culture Council between 1987 and 2011,” accessed 16 June 2013, <http://pcci.farhang.gov.ir/fa/desision/fehrest>.

<sup>13</sup> The Islamic Propagation Organization, Women’s Social and Cultural Council, Tehran Municipality, the Presidential Center for Women’s Affairs and Participation, the High Council of Iranian Youths, and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.

urban development and partially caused by women's obligation to veil and cover their bodies in public. The report also suggested that the covering, which is required by law, had caused a lack of exposure to sunlight, which in turn caused hair loss (see also *Iran* 2 July 2001). The same news story quoted Masoomeh Taghi, the adviser to the director of the ETO, describing "women's access to natural and green spaces in big cities" as their "natural right." One of the main recommendations listed in the report and the news piece was that the city facilitate the expansion of space for schoolgirls' sports by creating women-only parks. While in the earlier decades women's exercise was formulated as an antidote to the "Western cultural invasion"—with considerations for women's health only as an afterthought—in this report, the health aspect is brought to the fore and women-only parks are presented as a solution to public health problems. The report identifies two main factors as responsible for women's health problems: urban development and compulsory veiling.

The period immediately after the revolution and during the war Tehran experienced an increase in the population caused by the influx of Iran-Iraq war refugees and Afghan political refugees alongside a high rate of rural–urban migration born of economic necessity. The increase in the urban population was accompanied by an increase in housing demands, which could not be met. Due to the instability and unpredictability of the situation, private investment in housing drastically diminished, leaving the migrants and refugees with no option but to either squat in vacant apartments, the supply of which was limited, or to build illegal settlements and shantytowns on the outskirts of the city (*ibid*). In 1970, the land area of Tehran was two hundred square kilometers; by the time the war ended in 1988, the land area had expanded to six hundred square kilometers (*ibid*).

If the 1980s were marked by the rapid and unplanned horizontal expansion of the city, the 1990s marked its rapid and planned vertical expansion. With Rafsanjani in the presidential office and Karbaschi in the mayoral office, a new strategy was undertaken to do away with the makeshift economic management of wartime and to "launch a bold program of urban renewal while simultaneously integrating Tehran's fragmented and disillusioned population" (Ehsani 1999). Ehsani refers to the Tehran of the 1990s as "the laboratory of the neo-liberal transformation" of Iran during the reconstruction: "Mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi's controversial transformation of the city in the 1990s was based on mobilizing a speculative and entrepreneurial urban middle class that was called upon to finance the ambitious program of urban renewal and lend support to the political system" (1999, 23). From 1990 to 1998, argues Ehsani, "three-quarters of the revenues of the municipality came from the sale of residential permits that were in explicit violation of zoning laws"; these violations were partly "generated by the 'sale of density,' which exempted developers from zoning laws by allowing them to subdivide plots and build high-rises well above the permitted norm" (*ibid*). With the acceleration of speculative apartment building in both the less affluent and affluent districts of Tehran, and the mushrooming of high-rises and Soviet-style apartment buildings, the average dwelling size in Tehran fell by half, to 646 square feet (Ehsani 2009). This change has had profound effects of the lifestyles of urban dwellers, women in particular.

Prior to these developments and the change in the landscape of the city, women would treat the streets of their neighborhood as the front yard of their houses. They would gather in the afternoons to catch up with the "neighborhood news." The gathering usually took place either on the street or on the front steps of their homes. The younger generation would occupy the backyards of the houses, jumping rope and playing hopscotch and other kinds of street games.

As the years passed and most neighborhoods expanded vertically, the backyard was

replaced by a shared green space that would be populated by the many families who lived in the apartment complexes that were built in place of the one- and two-story houses. The narrow streets of the old neighborhoods are now filled with huge apartment complexes, most of whose units range from 430 to 1000 square feet—which, according to one of my interviewees, “could be suffocating, if you have two children running around all the time.” The streets are packed with cars and populated with “strangers,” that is, the new neighbors that are no longer known to the whole neighborhood. The apartment buildings and the high-rises that came to dominate the city scene in the 1990s took the familiarity of the traditional spaces away.

Fariba Adelkhah (2000), praising Karbaschi for his efforts in expanding public parks, describes the public mixed-gender parks as the extension of the street, of the familiarity of the traditional spaces, where families could gather and spend their evenings—as many in fact do. The Mothers’ Paradise, along with the other women-only parks, then, could be said to represent the women’s corner on those streets, providing women with a familiar comfortable space, where they can relax, walk, talk, or exercise. According to the bill passed by the city council in 2002, women-only parks are multidimensional in purpose, redressing a variety of pressures crowded urban living has created for women:

The expansion of apartment living and the increase in the frequency of everyday frictions and tensions and the lack of sports spaces have led to irreparable consequences, such as limited movement capabilities and heightened physical—and consequently mental and emotional—disorders, especially for women. These problems are two hundred times more for mothers because they have to deal with pregnancy complications, childcare problems, and housework duties. The mothers’ parks, by creating natural spaces and providing proper facilities and offering entertaining programs, could offer a venue for a variety of sports activities which suit different age cohorts within the target population.

Notably, the first and the most important need the parks are said to fulfill is women’s need for sports and leisure.

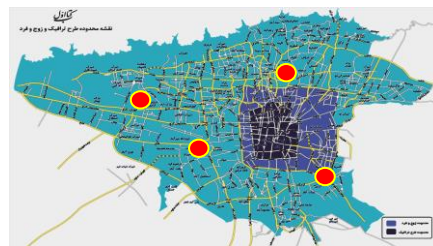
Women’s veiled bodies, which once symbolized the state’s properly Islamic identity, had turned into “unhealthy” bodies symbolizing the state’s failure to provide and care for its subjects. That the connection between vitamin D deficiency and women’s hijab became a publicly discussed problem two decades after the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows how the Islamic Republic can draw upon the authority of medical discourse in the modern world despite its own strong ideological commitment to mandatory veiling as a principal symbol of its sovereign identity. In this context, the Iranian state (in its governmental capacity) had to acknowledge the medical discourse of deprivation and respond to it through the provision of the women-only parks. Caught in the contradictions of its own essential identity—as a modern Islamic state—the Iranian state finesses the problem by continuing to require mandatory veiling as the solution to contemporary women’s dehumanization while encouraging segregated unveiling as the solution to contemporary bodies’ deprivations.

The 2002 bill permitting the municipality to pursue the creation of women-only parks reads:

With respect to mothers’<sup>14</sup> constructive position, their role in the growth of society, their emotional and educational centrality within the family, and their effective role in the process of human cultivation and reduction of social pathologies, and with the aim of boosting their mental and physical capabilities, directing their leisure time, and providing them with appropriate opportunities for healthy entertainments in Tehran, the municipality is obliged to provide and allocate proper spaces in the existing parks. Furthermore, it will design and establish exclusive spaces in Tehran to be called “Mothers’ Parks.”

Turning the bill into a national policy, the Ministry of Interior sent a directive to all of the provincial governors asking them “to consult with the women’s affairs offices and municipalities to locate a space of at least 107,000 square feet, which could be immediately purchased and transformed into a cultural and entertainment hub for women” (*Iran* 1 July 2007). Despite the directive, the bill was not acted upon. In 2003, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then the newly appointed conservative mayor of Tehran, retrieved the bill from the archives. He demanded that the Tehran Parks and Green Space Organization locate the ideal spots across Tehran and convert them, whether partially or in their entirety, to women-only parks.<sup>15</sup> Four parks from among the 1,357 existing parks were chosen. The official reports and interviews released by the city council and the municipality demonstrate that these four spots were chosen based on the following three criteria:

1. *Visual security*: In order to satisfy the clerics that the uncovered women inside the park were protected from the prying eyes of the men, the parks had to be built either on heights or in places that could be easily partitioned off by trees and/or walls.
2. *Accessibility*: The parks had to be built in places easily accessible by public transportation so that women would have no difficulty reaching them.
3. *Social justice*: The authorities wanted to make sure that the green space and the sports and entertainment facilities were evenly distributed across the city and among different classes.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of the first four women-only parks in Tehran (Source: *Ketabe Avval* [Iranian Yellow Pages], 2005)

These criteria suggest that the state, in responding to what it had formulated as the “women’s need,” had to take into account both the religious and the popular concerns.

<sup>14</sup> Note the transformation of “schoolgirls” into “mothers.” It seems that women could only be provided for as “mothers.”

<sup>15</sup> Note that women still have access to all the other parks. Additionally, the municipality is gradually increasing the number of women-only parks across the city.

Meanwhile, Mayor Ahmadinejad tried to push for the construction of the first women-only park in Tehran. But his attempts failed partly because of the political opposition he received from the Presidential Center for Women's Affairs and Participation, headed by the reformist Zahra Shojaee, who allegedly blocked the budget allocated for the creation of such parks (ibid.).

At this point, the state was totally fragmented. The administration and the Parliament were in the hands of the reformist faction while the Tehran City Council and Tehran Municipality were in the hands of the conservatives. Thus, although the push for the creation of women-only parks had originally come in 2002 from the reformist-led Ministry of Interior, the Presidential Center for Women's Affairs and Participation obstructed the municipality's formation of these parks, due to the reformists' political rivalry with the conservatives in Tehran's municipal government and their competing visions about women's provisions.<sup>16</sup> In her 2009 interview with me, Fereshteh Alimohammadi, the city expert who had prepared the final proposal for the Tehran City Council, claimed that the tensions had nothing to do with the parks per se but were about "who delivers, who gets the credit for such provision." By this time, both factions within the state had realized that their legitimacy and popularity depended on how well they provided for the population. Alimohammadi's words echo the words of Reza, one of the male guards at the entrance of the park, whom I interviewed during one of my visits to the Mothers' Paradise. He said: "Do you think they really care about you [women]? Wishful thinking! All they cared about was to get this board up there that says 'The Mothers' Paradise.'" Reza implied that the opening of the park was a mere show to demonstrate that the state treats women well.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad became Iran's president and Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf, another conservative, replaced Ahmadinejad as mayor of Tehran. Upon assuming the mayorship, Qalibaf announced that he would not launch new projects because he would instead finish what his predecessor had left unfinished; among these projects was the creation of women-only parks. With a conservative heading the municipality and a conservative now in the presidential office, there was no political opposition to the project. Thus, in 2007, the Mothers' Paradise, Iran's first women-only park, was opened in the northeast of Tehran and, in 2008, the Women's Paradise park was opened in the southeast of the city. The two other women-only parks are currently under construction.

Reaffirming the 2002 bill, these parks were designed to fulfill women's need for exercise and leisure. That the officials made the effort to formulate the construction of women-only parks not in terms of the requirements of an Islamic morality but in terms of women's need for exercise is not surprising if we take into account that according to "data from two values surveys conducted by researchers from the University of Tehran, Iran" in 2000 and 2005, "the stress on the Islamic identity of the nation [by the Iranian government]" has begot "oppositional responses from Iranians" (Moaddel 2010, 535). Moaddel argues that among the Iranian population there is a shift toward "social individualism, liberal democracy, [and] gender equality," and also an increasing demand on the state to "take more responsibility for meeting citizens' needs" (2010, 535, 542; see also Kurzman 2008). Under such circumstances, to maintain its legitimacy, the Islamic Republic of Iran has had to develop a governmental arm that provides for its citizens.

Furthermore, women-only parks provided an opportunity for the Iranian state to reconstruct its image in the international arena by presenting itself as a provider and protector—rather than a violator—of women's rights. Ahmadinejad's coming to power as the president had

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<sup>16</sup> Zahra Shojaee, the director of the Presidential Center for Women's Affairs, claimed that women's main demand was employment and not entertainment (*Shargh* 6 December 2003; see also *Keyhan* 30 November 2003).

heightened animosity from the United States and its allies, but the construction of women-only parks in 2007 earned the praise not only of the clerics in Qom, but also of the Agence France-Presse reporter, for example, who was amused to see Iranian women in “spaghetti strap vests and lycra shorts” (17 June 2008). Later Qalibaf was acknowledged and awarded for his efforts as the mayor of Tehran by both the City Mayor Foundation and the Washington-based International Institute for Transportation and Development Policy.

Women’s outdoor exercise in public parks, once characterized as unnecessary and un-Islamic, is now encouraged and promoted by the state. The language used in the officials’ interviews and reports on women-only parks highlights the shift in the state’s attitude toward women’s leisure-time activities and exercise. Women are now recognized as both mothers of the nation (with needs) and citizens (with rights), whose health is in danger and who therefore must be “served” by the state. “As citizens, they have paid their dues during the revolution and the war,” wrote 175 MPs in a letter, stating that it is now the state’s obligation to serve them (*Resalat* 17 May 2006). In various interviews with the press, Rasool Khadem, the head of the Social and Cultural Commission of the City Council of Tehran; Mohammad-Ali, the legal adviser to the commission; and Soheila Jelodarzadeh, MP, all emphasize that women as citizens have the right to freely and comfortably exercise in public—a right that, as they all say, had long been forgotten. Khadem points out that “women always complain about the considerable restrictions that they face.” “They always tell me,” she says, “Men are free to run and play in the streets, to enjoy the sun and the nature whenever they want. Women must be provided with the same conditions!” (*Iran* 27 October 2004). Emphasizing the responsibilities of the state toward its citizens, Zahra Moshir, the head of the Women’s Office of Tehran Municipality, points to the results of a survey of Tehrani women that was conducted in 2006: “The survey showed that access to sports and entertainment hubs was ranked first among women’s requests of the municipality. Thus, we decided to seriously pursue the project of constructing women-only parks” (*Ettelaat* 15 May 2008). Mokhtari, the head of the Parks and Green Space Organization of Tehran Municipality, says, “If, because of our religious and moral beliefs, we impose specific codes of conduct on women, then we have to provide them with a space where they can enjoy the green space peacefully and securely” (*Etemad Melli* 29 July 2008).

Several state officials, Tehran city councilors, and MPs admired the opening of the Mothers’ Paradise and pointed out that since women bear the burden of religion and must be covered all the time, it is necessary that they are provided with sports and entertainment facilities where they can take off their veils, wear the clothing of their choice, and freely exercise. Thus, in their statements about the opening of the Mothers’ Paradise, state officials and city councilors managed to shift attention away from compulsory veiling imposed by the sovereign state to the optional unveiling proposed by the liberal government. As a result, perhaps inadvertently in these statements, the focus shifts from the association of veiling with lack of freedom to the association of unveiling with freedom—most importantly, with freedom that is provided by the state. The workings of power were hidden behind the liberal mandate of individual choice. Instead of presenting itself as the prohibitor or curtailer of freedom, the state now presented itself as the provider upon whom subjects could rely.

The park was welcomed by most of the women who populate it on a daily basis. However, there were some objections as well. Some women, including feminist activists and the outspoken film director Tahmineh Milani, expressed concerns about the expansion of gender-segregated spaces and their long-term effect on the relationship between opposite sexes. A group of neighborhood men who had lost access to their favorite park also signed a petition and held a

small protest during the inauguration ceremony. Speaking to the protesters, Qalibaf argued that as women account for half the city's population, their needs should be met.<sup>17</sup>

The Mothers' Paradise, the first park of its kind in Tehran, now hosts more than 1,000 women per day (*Abrar* 13 November 2008). Although as early as the late 1980s some state officials had expressed concerns over the lack of exercise space for women and its negative impact on their mental and physical health, the first attempt to establish a women-only park in 1993 failed partly because women, as the potential users of this space, did not see the merits of the project and showed no interest in using a women-only park. The success of this new emphasis on the discourse of "women's health" and its appeal to women can only be understood in the context of the global focus on the mechanisms of achieving a healthy body. Across the globe there is a focus on cultivating healthy bodies through proper nutrition and sufficient exercise. In a recent event organized by Tehran Municipality, around 7,000 senior citizens gathered in Velayat Park in southern Tehran to promote health week. While in the early 1990s, the Jane Fonda Workout videos were found only in the well-to-do houses, there are now thousands of yoga and aerobics classes across the country, including in religious cities like Mashhad, Isfahan, and even Qom.<sup>18</sup>

Mansoureh, one of the female exercise instructors of Tehran Municipality, states in her interview with me that the municipality aims to "provide" women with one women-only park in each district of Tehran. "Women want more of these parks," Mansoureh rightly claims. When I shared this news with a group of women in the Mothers' Paradise, they all welcomed the "much-delayed" initiative. Women want more of what the state wants them to want. In the process, the line between "interest at the level of the consciousness of each individual" and "interest considered as the interest of the population" becomes blurry (Foucault 1991, 100). This completes the process through which, in dealing with women's outdoor exercise and activities, the Iranian state shifted from relying on its sovereign power to prohibit to using its governmental power to provide and produce. Instead of prohibiting outdoor exercise in the name of Islam, it produces new spaces, and it "rationalizes" and "justifies" the need for these segregated spaces by drawing on modern authoritative concepts and discourses such as urban justice, women's rights, and public health. In doing so, the state ultimately enables its desired behaviors and practices, such as women exercising separately from men, not through coercion and prohibition but through protection and provision.

### **Conclusion: Turning "Liberalism" on Its Head**

The story of the creation of Mothers' Paradise reveals shifts in Iranian state power from sovereignty to governmentality. I have argued that after the postrevolution stage of exceptionalism passed, the Iranian state had to conform to expectations, both at home and globally, about "modern" states. In the early days after the revolution, the newly formed state was concerned with establishing its control over the Iranian territory and developing an Islamic order. But once the state was consolidated, and after the end of the eight-year war with Iraq, it found itself caught up in web of unintended consequences resulting from its earlier policies of

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<sup>17</sup> Maryam Sinaiee, "All-Female Park Opens in Tehran," *National* (UAE), 2 September 2008, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/all-female-park-opens-in-tehran>.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Azadeh Moaveni, "Should a Pious Muslim Practice Yoga?" *Time*, 20 November 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1862306,00.html>, and Azadeh Moaveni, "How to Work Out while Muslim—and Female," *Time*, 16 August 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1924488,00.html>.



compulsory veiling and its policies of urban development. Tehran had turned into a jam-packed, polluted, and depressed city of more than eight million. Women's reported mental and physical health problems, which were associated with veiling and the depressive, confined lifestyle promoted by the state, pointed to the failures of a system that had promised to bring women dignity and integrity. On the other hand, the spread of the "bad hijab" phenomenon and women's disregard of the bans on women's exercise in public places and their continuous presence in mixed-gender parks pointed to the ineffectiveness of the state's prohibitive and disciplinary measures (see Bayat 2010, 2007). Additionally, with the globalization of cultural and political products and practices, Iran found itself in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the West, in which the banning of Western products was no longer feasible. Within this environment, far too many things were escaping the state's (sovereign) power. Governance had become cumbersome, futile, and fragile. It was against this background that Iranian state power was reconfigured into a more effective and productive form. This transformation was achieved by reorganizing everyday life, an attempt that was partially carried out through the reconfiguration of space along gender lines.

The Mothers' Paradise stands on top of the Abbas Abad hills as a sign of the productivity of state power. Rather than being the product of a sovereign state's vertical (top-down) initiative founded on religious justifications, this park is the product of a governmental state's initiative that draws on various sources of legitimacy that permeate the boundaries of "state" and "society" and that mobilize a variety of authoritative modern discourses at different scales (local and global) and with different orientations (Islamic and secular). Thus, instead of dismissing the Iranian government's mode of rule as that of religious totalitarianism using repression, it is more valuable to look closely at the intricacies of power and the multitudes of their logics in order to understand spaces, gender, Islamic rule, and subject formation in cities like Tehran.

Contrary to Huntington's clash-of-civilizations model (1993), which claims that globalization and Western domination will lead to the growing rejection of the West and Western discourses and values in the "Muslim world," the authority of "the modern" (in its Western liberal form) is central to the Iranian state's gender-segregation plans and policies. In her 2005 interview with Abrar, Laleh Eftekhari, a conservative female former MP, drew comparisons between gender-segregation policies in Iran and similar policies undertaken by "some laic governments" (Abrar 20 June 2005). In her 2009 interview with me, she insisted on talking about the benefits of the gender-segregation practices of Ahmadinejad's government, not as part of the Islamization project, but rather as a way of accommodating women's access to an otherwise male-dominated and unsafe public space. The emphasis was not on Islam and Islamic order but on the failures of modernity to provide an inclusive, secure urban space that is accessible to all. Zahra Moshir, then the director of the Women's Office of Tehran Municipality, said in an interview that "our city is masculine; it is built by men and therefore women's needs have not been considered." She suggested that the construction of women-only parks was an attempt to "make women feel at home in a city that belongs to them as well" (*Hamshahri* 1 September 2008). Perhaps it is ironic that both of these women draw on the authority of modern liberal discourses on "the right to the city" and feminist discourses on "the city as masculine" to justify gender-segregation policies. Here, modern liberal paradigms of feminism and the right to the city are turned on their head. Gender-segregation policies that are supposedly aimed at taking women out of the city are presented as an attempt to reinsert women back into public spaces.

## Chapter 2

### Ideologies in Motion: Gender-Segregated Busing and the Right to the City

In the congested streets of downtown Tehran, she drives the bus from one busy street to the next. Gohar is one of the thirty female bus drivers who in 2008 were hired by the city to conduct the newly launched rapid transit buses.<sup>19</sup>

*“This is not a woman’s job!” . . . “The streets of Tehran are no joke! Only a man can handle this chaos!” . . . “What a brave woman!” . . . “Hmm, it’s a nice gesture I guess!” . . . “Earning a halal [religiously legitimate] income is to be praised, be it by driving a bus or by working in an office!”*

At the bus station, the waiting passengers strike up conversations to pass the time: “A woman is driving a bus!” “Women driving buses” does not fit within the popular imaginary. There are those who admire the breaking of this taboo and those who condemn it, but both groups are equally surprised at such a sight and do not doubt its transgressive character. Lonely in the crowd is the woman bus driver, who “has heard enough of this.” She does not see herself as “an icon”: “I merely wanted a job and I’m a good driver. Besides, believe it or not, the bus is a much better work environment than many of my other work environments.” She has been hired and trained by the United Bus Company of Tehran (hereafter UBCT), is happy to have this job, and “could not care less” about the words spreading in the streets—in her workplace, that is. She steers the big wheel, pulls over toward the curb, and presses the brake pedal. The engines idle, the air releases, and the bus screeches to a stop. Gohar turns to me and, with a victorious smile on her face, says: “I’m as thick-skinned as a rhino! Being the first is always difficult.”

She is not the first, however. In 1992, sixteen years prior, one of the local branches of the UBCT temporarily hired six women to drive buses part-time. This move generated much objection from both men and women, who turned their objection into written words and sent them off to different news outlets, as well as from various factions within the city government and the state who considered the act to be “discourteous” to women and “their esteemed position” (*Jomhoori Islami* 28 December 1992). Women drivers were sent back to their homes.

Gohar has not heard about this story but is not surprised either: “Look! After all these years some people still are not at ease with these hires. Obviously it was worse back then!” Rain has filled the street with water. Everyone at the bus station is restlessly awaiting the arrival of the next bus. Gohar pulls the bus over to the curb. Men and women rush to get on board. She gently reminds the male passengers that they have to use the back door: “The front section is reserved for women.” Men grumble: “How come?” In the previous system, men sat in the front section, while women would normally populate the section at the back. In the newly launched rapid transit buses, however, the sections are switched. Gohar’s briefing is over. The passengers are all on board. Gohar shuts the door and drives away. Away with it go the passengers and their words.

A bus is a mobile space, an ideology in motion. It moves from one neighborhood to the other, day after day, week after week, year after year. It is the same bus, but never the same space.

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<sup>19</sup> Tehran Bus Rapid Transit was officially launched in 2008 in order to expand the city’s transport network and to facilitate the motor traffic.

Three decades ago, during the 1980s, when the bus's interior was reshaped by a metal bar that divided it into two separate sections, women were conceived of merely as potential passengers, and not even ones deserving of equal space on the bus, let alone having the authority to drive it. They were relegated to the smaller section at the bus's back, while men took the more spacious front. During the 2000s, as Gohar and twenty-nine other female bus drivers steered their way around the city, rain or shine, the buses no longer represented a male space with token seats for women in the back. Women share an equal, although still separate, bus space. Additionally, during peak hours, women enjoy exclusive rides on the newly launched women-only buses. Women's public presence in the city, once considered an interruption of, or an exception to, public order, has become an integrated part of it, requiring recognition and accommodation. The bus is the same bus, still divided, but what it signifies has changed.

How do we grasp the shifting contours of this space, the shifting reality of the metal bar that once signified an unequal distribution of bus space? How and why did the gender organization of the bus space—and the city it traverses—change over time? How do these shifts bring about changes in the power structure that instigated them in the first place? To answer these questions we must look at the conflictual processes through which the project of bus segregation has been implemented. Far from being simply a practice of exclusion easily intelligible as an expression of the static patriarchy of the Islamic state, both the discourses and the implications of gender-segregated busing changed with shifts in the sociopolitical context. This chapter takes a historical approach to gender-segregated busing in Tehran from 1979, when the Islamic Republic was established, to the present.

In the early 1980s, when the newly established state was concerned with consolidating its Islamic identity, women's bus ridership was among the practices that it felt undermined the "Islamic" public order. According to the shari'a (moral code and religious law of Islam), the unnecessary mingling of, and physical contact between, unrelated men and women is haram (religiously forbidden), and therefore the crowded bus space of the Islamic Republic, within which men and women would constantly fall over each other at every bus stop, was not "Islamic." To demonstrate the Islamic character of the state, not only did Tehran promote women's domesticity, but it also implemented certain regulatory measures for women's public presence; namely, it made veiling mandatory and instituted gender segregation policies across the city. Accordingly, to reduce women's contact with male bus riders, the UBCT divided bus space into a small women's section at the back (one-third of the bus space) and a more spacious men's section in front (the remaining two-thirds). The border was made visible by a metal divider bar, a signifier of an Islamic public order.

Three decades later, Tehran's landscape looks different: public space is overtly feminized,<sup>20</sup> and women outnumber men in all levels of education and have an increased share of the job market. Additionally, the growth in the rate of divorce (up by 135 percent over the past decade) and the lagging number of new marriages have left many women in charge of their own lives (Shahrokni and Dokouhaki 2012). No longer relegated to the domestic, they use the city space for education, leisure, consumption, working, and shopping. They increasingly use the bus, which enables their movement across the city's spaces, as they pursue these various activities.

Ironically, women's mobility outside the home, and across the city, has been partially

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<sup>20</sup> By using the term "feminization" I do not claim that women comprise the majority of bus riders in Tehran, although on some routes and during certain hours of the day that is the case. Rather, I am referring to the constant increase in the number of women who ride buses.

enabled by the initial gender segregation plans in the 1980s.<sup>21</sup> That small section at the back of the bus made their rides religiously pure and physically safe, encouraging them to lay claim to it as a space of their own. Women developed a sense of entitlement to the (separate) bus space. The metal bar embodied the unjust distribution of a space to which they now felt entitled, prompting them to demand a larger share of the bus space and equal access to it. During the 2000s, the UBCT not only expanded the women's section to half the bus, but also launched women-only buses. This second phase of gender segregation was carried out and justified under the secular terms of "women's rights" and "women's security and comfort."

This shift in discourse might be said to point to the eventual withering away of the religious dimension of a state—as some would be quick to point out with a celebratory tone—but what is more significant is that, contrary to common understanding, gender-segregated spaces in Tehran shifted from functioning as spaces of *exclusion* that restricted women's movements in the city to spaces of *inclusion* that facilitated their presence in an otherwise male-dominated urban space. This chapter is an attempt to capture this dialectic. Arguing against the reification of gender-segregated spaces, I approach these spaces as an ongoing production of historically embedded social relationships (Lefebvre 1992, 1996; Massey 2005, 1994), explore the politics around their production, examine the imperatives of the state that produces them, and demonstrate their diverse—and sometimes paradoxical—implications for women's experience of, and mobility in, the city. In order to do so, I make use of the notion of the "right to the city" (Lefebvre 1996) and argue that the expansion of the urban life spaces of women and their extended right to the bus space, and consequently to the city, has been enabled by gender segregation practices that are normally conceived of as disabling and restrictive.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Right to the City and Gender-Segregated Spaces**

### *Women and the City*

Feminist geographers and urban sociologists have long scrutinized gender as a taken-for-granted aspect of urban life (Bondi and Domosh 1998; Massey 1994; McDowell 1999; Valentine 1989). Some have attempted to show how relationships between men and women or the terms of what is "natural" for them get (re)constituted by hierarchical spatial relations (Massey 1994). Others have pointed out how social signifiers such as class enhance or diminish women's access to the city (Wilson 1991).

To explain the gendered dimension of the city, scholars have also pointed out how women's exclusion from public spaces is mostly the regulatory effect of gendered narratives that shape the city as a space of danger, harassment, and sexual assault for women (McDowell 1999; Massey 1994; Walkowitz 1992; Wilson 1991). The variety of dress codes, most of which target women's bodies and the ways they carry their bodies in public, also regulate the way women may express themselves in public. For instance, Minoo Moallem (2001) suggests that in Iran, veiling women has served as a means to reassert masculinity and regulate women's public presence so that they appear mostly as the bearers of an Islamic community and family.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For an analysis of similar effects in higher education, see Golnar Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Comparative Education Review* 47, no. 3 (2003): 269–86.

<sup>22</sup> For a similar analysis of the implications of veiling for women in Egypt, see Arlene E. MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> On veiling in Iran, see also Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Ashraf Zahedi, "Concealing and Revealing Female Hair: Veiling Dynamics in Contemporary Iran," in *The Veil: Women*

Likewise, Antonia Finnane (1996) has shown how in the newly established People's Republic of China, women's dress became a "national problem." Gender segregation is usually cited as the most extreme version of these regulatory measures (Abu-Lughod 1987; Moghadam 2002).

### *Gender Segregation*

Despite the great anxiety that exists about the practices of gender segregation, for a long time gender-segregated spaces remained curiously underexamined. Recently, however, some scholars have begun studying these spaces and their implications for women. Le Renard (2011), for example, studies the women-only floors in Saudi shopping malls and explains how these gendered spaces are the products not just of an Islamic ideology but also of urban development plans in Saudi Arabia. She also demonstrates how these spaces have become a stage where women exhibit their consumerist subjectivities.

Nevertheless, within the dominant frame, gender segregation is often conceived of as an exclusionary practice rooted in Islamic gender ideologies and as such has remained the domain of the Islamic and Middle East studies (Abu-Lughod 1987; Ahmed 1982; Le Renard 2011; Mernissi 1987; Moghadam 2003; Paidar 1997). For example, Abu-Lughod (1987, 167) points to the creation of "male and female turf" as "the most important element of the structure of the city contributed by Islam" and describes these "turfs" (gender-segregated spaces) as "physically distinctive" and "visually insulated regions." This is how gender-segregated spaces are perceived in the popular imaginary as well (Ahmed 1982). It is always already assumed that gender-segregation practices are exclusionary practices that signify an overtly masculine public space and that they are founded on Islamic gender ideologies, which are inherently patriarchal. In this chapter I challenge both of these assumptions in two ways: First, I demonstrate that gender-segregated spaces in a modern metropolis like Tehran are shaped by, and reflect, a mixture of institutions, ideologies, and interests. These spaces gain their shape and meaning from a combination and coincidence of a set of historically embedded sociopolitical relations. Secondly, I argue that the deepening of gender segregation practices signifies a gradual *expansion*—and not *contraction*—of women's right to the city.

### *The Right to the City*

Both the understanding of urban space as a social product and the notion of the right to the city are central to Henri Lefebvre's works (1996, 1992). The right to the city entails "the right to claim presence in the city, to wrest the use of the city from privileged new masters and democratize its spaces" (Isin 2000, 14). Many authors have drawn upon or invoked Lefebvre's approach to urban citizenship and the right to the city (Isin 2000; Mitchell 2003). Although Lefebvre's right to the city was an emancipatory project aimed at radically transforming the city by giving priority to the social "use-value" of the (urban) space over its "exchange-value," his notion has also gained traction in liberal and neoliberal policy institutions and organizations like UNESCO and Habitat International Coalition, where it evokes citizens' rights to safety, leisure, and equal access to urban-life resources such as land, housing, water, and the like. Nevertheless, the right to the city has two components: appropriation and participation. The right to the city is not just about the full and complete use of places but also about the ability and opportunity to participate in the production and governance of those places. These two components, as Iris

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*Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, ed. Jennifer Heath (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 250–66; Ashraf Zahedi, "Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 3 (2007): 75–98.

Marion Young (1990) states, are essential for the construction of “the good life.” People must be able to materialize their potential and exercise their capacities in the city and to find in the urban an expression of themselves. They should also be given the opportunity to participate in the production of the urban, that is, in the production of the conditions that enable the realization of their potential.

Invoking the two components of the right to the city, I argue that while the initial phase of gender segregation, which took place during the 1980s, targeted women as moral subjects and signified an attempt to contract women’s right to the city in the name of an Islamic morality, the second phase of gender segregation, during the early 2000s, targeted women as rights-bearing citizens and signified an attempt to expand women’s right to the city. During the late 2000s, the UBCT, which had become partially privatized, began addressing women as consumers. Not only did women develop a sense of entitlement to the (separate) bus space and appropriate it as their right, but they also, through their daily struggle “to wrest the use of the city [buses]” from men and their subsequent employment by the UBCT, participated in the transformation of that bus space and what it signified.

### **In the Women’s Section**

At 7 a.m., I arrive at the Qods Square bus station and approach one of the drivers, who’s sitting behind the wheel, cracking roasted watermelon seeds in his teeth, waiting for passengers to get on board. This is the beginning of the Qods–Resalat bus line, which runs from the northeast to the southeast of Tehran, and the bus will not take off until it is full. I say hello to the driver and get on board, at which point he stops cracking seeds and tells me that I have to use the back entrance. Surprised, I say, “I’m sorry, I thought women sit in front these days!” He puts aside his pack of watermelon seeds and gets his cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket. Once he is done with what seems to be his daily morning ritual, he looks at me and says, “Back or front what difference does it make? You women are the crown of our heads wherever you sit!” As I get off the bus to re-enter at the back, a young woman wearing a khaki high-school uniform bangs on the driver’s window. He rolls down the window only to hear her shouting about the excess diesel emission: “Can’t you see we are all suffocating at the bus stop? Turn off the engine sir! Or, excuse *me*, are you too busy cracking your watermelon seeds!” Instead of turning off the engine, he leaves the window open, lights up his cigarette, looks in the rear view mirror to see whether the bus is loaded or not, then urges the young woman to get on board as he is about to take off.

As we move down Shariati Avenue, the bus eventually gets overcrowded with passengers. I look up and see the girl in the khaki uniform leaning on the metal bar, the divider that separates men from women. She is still complaining about the driver. The young boys next to her, but on the other side of the bar, laugh and say, “Take it easy, dude! Look at mister driver! He is still rolling his eyes at you.” One of the boys mocks the driver. They all laugh. Transgression usually happens where the boundaries are erected. Or, one might argue that it is only logical that the mingling happens where the separation begins; after all, that is the one zone of contact left on the bus. From this perspective, one can say that the separation remains incomplete.

Sitting in front of me are Narges and Shabnam, students of industrial engineering at ‘Elm o San‘at Technical University in Narmak, a neighborhood in east Tehran. Narges lives in Chizar, an old neighborhood in north Tehran. Shabnam lives in downtown Tehran but had stayed overnight with Narges to prepare for their exams. I ask them if they always go to university by bus. Shabnam is busy with her “last-minute review of the formula,” so Narges responds:

I used to drive to university until I noticed that it is much easier to go on these buses. Don't you think so? The traffic kills me. At least when I'm on the bus I don't need to worry about driving. It's a mess!

"The buses are a mess too. No?" I ask, to which she replies, Yeah, they're crowded. But then we have our own separate space. Once a woman entered the bus. There was no seat left. She asked me to scoot over so that she could sit next to me. Isn't this funny! Oh and I must tell you this, every day there is a fight: one day a woman gets stuck in between the doors and screams, one day someone has a fight on his cell phone that we all have to listen to, one day . . . uh well, you are a sociologist, you enjoy these scenes!

She is right. The bus is the microcosm of the society as a whole.

By the time we reach the end of the line at Resalat, almost everyone knows me. I say good-bye to all and then wait to take the same line back up to Qods. As the bus waits to depart, street vendors jump on the bus, selling tablecloths, candies, cosmetics, and kitchen knives; "sometimes," one woman bus rider notes, "they even sell women's underwear, especially in the women-only compartments in the metro."<sup>24</sup> I wonder what the vendors sell in the men's section, at which point I realize that these gender-segregated spaces are not just the product of the differences between the two genders. They (re)produce these differences as well. As the bus gets crowded and as one moves away from the metal divider, one's understanding of the other's world lessens—their world appears to be inaccessible, different. This socially constructed difference simultaneously sets the two genders apart and pulls them together. It creates both distance and desire to overcome that distance.

On our way to uptown Tehran, Ms. Bagheri, a fifty-five-year-old domestic worker, is sitting next to me. She lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Resalat with her daughter, who is in college studying Arabic literature, and her son, who is a twenty-eight-year-old mechanic. "And your husband?" I ask. "He was a truck driver. He was killed in an accident fifteen years ago." Ms. Bagheri, who does not own a car, gets on different buses every day to reach the houses she has to clean. With tuition and fee increases in (private) colleges,<sup>25</sup> she needs to work even longer hours to be able to keep her daughter in school: "I don't want her to end up like me!" She takes her hands off her chador (full-body cloak) and lets it slip onto her shoulders. She then unknits her scarf, brings a small fan out of her purse, and enjoys its breeze: "It's hot! Good that men can't see me here!" It *is* hot. The women's section is populated by female bus riders blocking the prying eyes of men who are just on the other side of the metal bar, and since Ms. Bagheri is sitting at the far back, she trusts that no man will be able to see her uncovered hair. She easily loosens her veil. Zohreh, a thirty-five-year-old housewife sitting to my right, rolls her eyes and whispers: "C'mon! So they see your hair a little. What's the big deal?" She is in fact trying to scorn Ms. Bagheri for her religiosity, while making a point about her disbelief in religious law. She brings her head closer to my ear and continues: "*This* is our problem, not the government,"

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<sup>24</sup> Metros are also gender segregated. However, unlike buses, women have the option of either riding on one of the two women-only compartments or joining other passengers in mixed compartments. The majority of my interviewees expressed that they would rather ride on the women-only compartments.

<sup>25</sup> Public education in Iran is free. However, in response to an increasing number of students, private universities have mushroomed all over the country. Private universities are not free and their tuition fees are constantly on the rise.

implying that the state managed to implement mandatory veiling and other religious rules because it had the support of Ms. Baghari and the like. Zohreh has dropped off her eight-year-old son at school and is off to visit her mother.

The bus space is occupied by women of all classes and walks of life. Every morning, the lives of the girl in khaki uniform, Narges and Shabnam, Zohreh, Ms. Bagheri, and “mister driver” converge on the bus space, a mobile public sphere whose contours are always in the making.<sup>26</sup> As women ride the buses in increasing numbers and make their way around the city, a new notion of femininity emerges, one that is no longer associated with domesticity, one that demands recognition in the city, one that lays claims to city spaces and to the ways they are governed.

More surprising than the gradual integration of women in public spaces, or the expansion of their right to the city, are the ways in which this shift has occurred. This gradual increase in the number of women in public space, as I will discuss, was due to the societal developments of the past three decades that eventually opened up spaces of education, work, leisure, and consumption for women. The city government has responded to women’s increased presence by deepening and expanding gender segregation across the city. While many see this as the government’s attempt to reinforce the masculinity of the city by curbing women’s access to it, I argue that in fact this further segregation of public transportation has facilitated women’s movement across city spaces. During the initial phase of gender segregation, which was carried out in the 1980s, the state conceived of women as moral subjects whose virtue, dignity, and religious purity was in need of protection. By the 2000s, however, as Tehran expanded its segregation plans by launching women-only buses, city and state officials addressed women as urban citizens with objective needs and the right to be protected by the state. In the language of the state officials, women’s right to secure and comfortable rides should be protected, and the conditions for the realization of their rights to the city had to be provided. One such condition was the expansion of gender-segregated transportation.

### **Gender Segregated Busing of the 1980s: Women as Subjects of Islamic Morality**

Upon its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran sought to reconfigure the cities. According to Lefebvre (1992, 54), “A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential.” A revolution had occurred, and the public appearance of the city and its residents had to be revolutionized as well. The Islamic Republic of Iran implemented new rules to regulate the public face of the city. For men, ties and suits were replaced by buttoned-up long and loose dark-colored shirts, and shaved faces were replaced with bearded ones. For women, veiling became compulsory, not just because it was a religious obligation but also because it symbolized the undoing of the Pahlavis’<sup>27</sup> modernization project, which had been partially displayed in the de-veiling of women.<sup>28</sup> Street names were changed, and in place of the names of the shahs and kings of the past appeared the names of the Islamic saints and imams,

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<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of the specificities of Iranian public spheres/spaces, see Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People’s Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Nazanin Shahrokni, “The Politics of Polling: Polling and the Constitution of Counter-Publics during ‘Reform’ in Iran,” *Current Sociology* 60, no. 2 (2010): 202–21.

<sup>27</sup> The Pahlavis were the two Iranian monarchs who reigned from 1925 to 1979, when their monarchy was toppled down by the Islamic revolution.

<sup>28</sup> For works that address the Pahlavis’ de-veiling project, see Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Afsaneh Najmabadi, “(Un)veiling Feminism” *Social Text* 64, 18, no. 3 (2000): 29–45.



and later those of the martyrs of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Schools, university classrooms, beaches, and hairdressers, to name but a few spaces, were segregated along gender lines. All these transformations took place in order to “Islamize” the public space of the city. These changes, however, were not enough to legitimize the newly established state, as it also needed popular support. The “Islamic” revolution of 1979 was carried out mostly by the urban middle class but had come to be labeled as the revolution of the “barefoot” (*pa-berahneh*). The “barefoot,” the popular classes, demanded what they had been promised: public housing, public schooling, and public transportation.

“One Peykan [an Iranian-made car] for each Iranian,” was a slogan that Amir Abbas Hoveyda, Iran’s prime minister between 1965 and 1977, had occasionally used. This slogan typifies the former regime’s plans and policies to encourage private car ownership as opposed to public transit ridership. Under the Islamic Republic, this privileging of private car ownership, and consequent disregard for public transportation, was interpreted as part of “an agenda that was aimed at pulling down the disadvantaged even further into the dark abyss of dependency” (*Zan-e Rooz* 8 August 1981). Since both the revolution and the new regime had a popular character, the expansion of public services, especially public transportation, became a priority. In his first public speech upon his return to Iran in February 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, stated, “We are for Islam, not for capitalism . . . and Islam will eliminate class differences,” and he promised the nation free piped water, free electricity, and free public bus transportation.

The shortage of buses, the US-imposed economic sanctions on Iran, the ever-increasing population, and the influx of war refugees from the southern cities had created a grave transportation situation wherein people had to wait in long lines before they could get on a bus, and once on, they were, in the words of several of my interviewees, “sandwiched by other passengers.” The regime faced increasing demand to equip the bus lines with more and better buses. It was time for the newly established state to deliver the promised services. Yet what was left in the treasury was mainly spent on the war.

The transportation problems were even worse for women. Women have been driving in Iran since the 1940s but their access to private cars has been limited. Up until recent decades, and despite Hoveyda’s slogan, car ownership was mostly limited to men of the upper classes. Thus, women, especially women from the popular classes, had to rely on public transportation for their commutes. During the first years of the regime, buses were, as Jaleh, a sixty-eight-year-old retired nurse recalls, “men’s territories.” According to Jaleh and a few other interviewees, “The buses looked more like sardine cans.” Many people complained that they felt like “sheep being herded into a small space” (*Zan-e Rooz* 17 November 1984). Under such circumstances, Jaleh adds, “The few women who did ride the buses felt sandwiched in between men.” This made bus ridership an un-Islamic practice, since in Islam physical contact between unrelated men and women is haram. Thus, in the early 1980s, women’s bus ridership was among the practices that it felt undermined the “Islamic” public order. As early as 1981, the UBCT issued statements declaring that they “always seek to find the most appropriate method to guarantee that Islamic rules and ethics are respected by all bus passengers and that dear citizens, especially observant Muslim sisters, are not troubled” (*Zan-e Rooz* 29 August 1981).

Nevertheless, the chaotic situation on the buses persisted—an indication of the state’s failure to deliver the dignified life it had promised for women. The letters to the editor of *Zan-e Rooz* magazine, Iran’s oldest women’s weekly, provide a window onto women’s anxiety about the unwarranted physical contact between men and women on the buses. They also capture the

concern that some men, particularly religious men, with protecting their “sisters” chastity and religious purity, as indicated in the words of a male bus rider in 1982:

Due to the congestion inside the buses, some of our sisters, who would have to stand in the close proximity of unrelated men, are extremely uncomfortable (due to the pressures coming from the crowd) and they sometimes consider their ridership haram. Regardless, they are bound to use the buses. (*Zan-e Rooz* 8 August 1981)

Likewise, religious women were concerned about their chastity and religious purity, while nonreligious and secular women were concerned about sexual harassment and respect for their personal space. For instance, in a 1981 letter to the editor of *Zan-e Rooz*, a woman named Parivash wrote, “As a woman I cannot bear the idea of standing in close physical contact with these men.” She explained that men, whether “brothers” (Islamists) or “comrades” (secular leftists), continued to harass women on the buses, emphasizing that for her, discomfort had nothing to do with religious ethics (*Zan-e Rooz* 20 June 1981). Some, like M.D., who rode the bus to and from work, suggested that the UBCT should either “increase the number of buses in each bus line” or alternatively “segregate the bus space into a women’s and a men’s section” (*Zan-e Rooz* 13 March 1987).

Lacking sufficient funds to add new buses to the city bus lines, the UBCT attempted to experiment with a new plan—gender segregation of the buses. According to various statements published by UBCT officials, installing a metal divider that separated the men’s section from the women’s would not make the bus more spacious but would at least make the bus space more Islamic by keeping men and women apart. In 1988, Valiollah Chahpoor, then the director of the UBCT, stated in an interview:

Since we are an Islamic republic we have to make sure that our deeds follow the rules of an Islamic republic. Our deeds have to be in harmony with our mottos and thus we had to do something about women’s presence in society and the protection in public transportation of our sisters and their hijab. What I mean is that when our sisters are obliged to observe the hijab in the streets, we cannot let them be under pressure on the buses. . . . We are Muslims and believe in Islam. The Qur’an says when an unrelated man and woman are in a room, the door should be left open. . . . All these instructions have been given to *prevent moral corruption*. We follow the Islamic rules. (*Zan-e Rooz* 20 January 1988; emphasis added)

The UBCT was in charge of administering and supervising the segregation project, which, as the following section illustrates, was based on trial and error.

#### *Gender Segregation on the Double-Decker Buses*

The 1980s were the years of the double-decker buses, giant ship-like blue and orange buses with two floors. Gender segregation on the double-decker bus space was easy, or so it seemed: the first floor was assigned to “sisters” and the second floor to “brothers.” (The use of “sisters” and “brothers” as opposed to “women” and “men” points to the dominance of an Islamic and a revolutionary discourse and ethics). But, as the giant bus traversed the city, its first floor remained partially empty. “Brothers” were crowded on the second floor, while there were not that many “sisters” to fill in the first-floor space. The plan did not appear feasible. Thus, the

UBCT developed a new plan. This time, the second floor and part of the first floor were given to men. In order to reduce physical contact between the two genders, women were asked to use the back door, tear their tickets, and throw them in a metal box that had been installed next to the back door. Men's tickets would be collected at the front door by the driver's assistant. Moreover, explained the director of the UBCT in a 1988 interview, the bus company installed movable dividers on the first floor "so that depending on the number of passengers it could be moved back and forth, giving more space to brothers and sisters respectively" (*Zan-e Rooz* 20 January 1988). In effect, however, as buses were always overloaded with passengers, the metal bar was fixed in a way that women could only use one-third of the bus space.

In the 1990s, the double-decker buses were removed from the streets and sent to the bus museum. The streets of Tehran had become jam-packed, leaving no space for these giant buses to travel in between different neighborhoods.

### *Gender Segregation on the Regular Buses*

Alongside the double-decker buses were the regular buses. It was difficult for the campaign directors to come up with a viable plan to segregate the regular (one floor) buses, partially because, as opposed to the double-decker buses, regular buses of the early 1980s had only one door, in front. At first, they decided to allocate one bus to women and one to men. "It was a ridiculous plan!" says Tahereh, one of my interviewees. According to Tahereh, who was in her late sixties, this plan created a lot of problems for families who wanted to reach the same destination but had to wait for different buses. With the importation of two-door buses, this plan was soon replaced by one in which it was suggested that "where possible men should use the front door and therefore occupy the front space of the bus and women should use the back door" (*Zan-e Rooz* 15 October 1982). And thus on the bus's exterior, "brothers" was written next to the front door, and "sisters" next to the back door. The newly imported buses did not have a metal divider, so there were no boundaries between the men's and women's sections. Ahmad Ziyaee Boroojani, the UBCT director at the time, stated that "If there [were] more sisters, they [would] take up more space, and if there [were] more brothers, they would take up more space"; as far as the UBCT was concerned, "the problem was solved" (*ibid*). For the bus riders, however, the problem persisted. "Who pays attention to the signs on the outside of the bus?" wrote a reader in a 1984 letter to the editor of *Zan-e Rooz*.

In the late 1980s, the UBCT decided to follow a plan for the regular buses that had proved to be successful on the double-decker buses and in the two provincial cities of Isfahan and Tabriz:<sup>29</sup> the bus space was divided into two distinct sections separated by a divider. In the regular buses, as opposed to the double-decker buses, women would get on the bus from the front door and men from the back door. "It was all messed up," remembers Fatemeh, a fifty-one-year-old mother of two. "I did not have a car back then and had to use the bus on a daily basis," she says. She explains to me that they would often find themselves clueless as to which door they should use, how much space they could take up, whether women-only buses still existed, if they should tear their ticket or give it to the driver's assistant. "Everyday there was a fight at the bus stop among the passengers and the driver and among the passengers themselves," she recounts.

The UBCT kept experimenting with different plans. Eventually they settled with a

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<sup>29</sup> The Islamic Republic has often used the provinces as testing grounds for its more controversial initiatives. The pilot plan is usually implemented in lightly populated provinces to gauge the severity of the reaction among (sometimes radically) different constituencies. If successful, the plan is then extended to larger provinces and the capital city (Shahrokni and Dokouhaki 2012).

unified plan across all bus lines and in all cities. They relegated women to the back third of the bus and sent men up to the more spacious front, separating them by a divider. The new buses had two doors, which also made it possible for women to use the back door and for men to use the front door. The UBCT issued the following statement:

In order to respect our valued passengers and abide by the *holy* boundaries inside the buses and in order to prevent some moral problems, with the efforts of officials and with full capacity we have undertaken to implement the gender segregation plan inside the buses *to promote the appropriate Islamic ethics*. This plan is still in effect; however, since no plan could be successfully implemented without the active and widespread participation of the people, we expect *the hezbollah nation*<sup>30</sup> to stand by our colleagues in the gender segregation campaign and cooperate. While using the buses, sisters use the back door and brothers the front door, and so in this way each citizen will play their part in this valuable *Islamic move*. (*Zan-e Rooz* 13 December 1991; emphasis added)

Despite occasional complaints by the bus riders about the “inconsistency” of the gender segregation plans, sporadic reports of vandalism (i.e., breaking the metal divider), and the UBCT’s statements about “Tehranis’ lack of cooperation,” the plan succeeded. The physical contact between men and women bus riders was reduced to the minimum, and so the bus space was finally “Islamized.”

### **The 1990s and the Feminization of the Public Space**

In the immediate period after the 1979 revolution, the Iranian public space became extremely masculinized. Many of the secular women were removed or removed themselves from their places of work: some resigned, some were dismissed, and some took refuge in the privacy of their homes, continuing their profession within the familial space or turning to professions that allowed them to stay in their familial space, the privacy of which allowed them to grow and “reconstruct their lives” (Esfandiari 1997). Those among the religious women of the lower classes who had been active within public spaces transformed by the liminality of the revolutionary demonstrations had evacuated these spaces as soon as the revolution was over. Others had rarely frequented the public spaces of the city and continued to stay away in the postrevolutionary period.

Those women willing to enter public spaces faced resistance. Manijeh recalls that after the reopening of universities in 1983, she had applied for a faculty position at one of Tehran’s universities. “My husband, who was also a university professor, told me that they will not hire a woman.” Nevertheless, she applied for the position and, as it turned out, her husband was on the selection committee. Manijeh tells me that her husband witnessed the other committee members ignore her file just because she was a woman. Such stories, even if exaggerated or inaccurate—as some of my other interviewees alleged—demonstrate postrevolutionary perceptions about women’s presence in the work force and the public spaces of the city. In such an environment, then, the allocation of a smaller section of the bus space to women was not surprising.

But in the years that followed, this masculinized public space gave way to a more feminized one. Despite this initial over-masculinization of the public space, by the second half of the 1980s, women had eventually and increasingly found their way into the public spaces and

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<sup>30</sup> This term should not be confused with the Lebanese political party Hezbollah. The term literally means “the party of God,” and the UBCT is referring to Iran as a nation that serves as the party of God.

spheres. Two factors contributed to the feminization of public spaces: one, the initial phase of gender segregation provided a religiously appropriate and safe space for women in the public sphere and facilitated their mobility across the city, and second, the social, political, and economic imperatives of the 1990s drove more women toward higher education and into the workplace.

With the “Islamization” of the bus space, many women who had been hesitant to use the buses started using them. Neda, whose family lives in a working-class neighborhood, explains to me that without the allocation of distinct spaces to men and women, her mother would have been confined within the house and would have only gone out with Neda’s father or in a relative’s car: “Her movement was limited. She would have perhaps just walked across the neighborhood to buy groceries.” Neda’s mother is extremely observant, Neda explains, and rarely talks to strange men—“except the bakers and the grocers,” she adds, “who are not ‘strangers’ anymore!” For the past fifteen years, however, Neda’s mother has been getting on the bus, travelling from the southern part of the city to the center to help Neda with child care. Gender segregation has, perhaps ironically, made it possible for women like Neda’s mother to feel comfortable and proper riding buses—and for men like Neda’s father to permit this movement.

In 1989, UBCT director Chahpoor also remarked on how the partitioned space for women brought a new female ridership:

After the implementation of the gender segregation plan, we noticed that we gained new passengers, meaning that those of our sisters who had never used the buses were added to our bus passengers. In Baharestan Square, I myself witnessed this situation: I saw sisters who were getting on the bus who told me that they had never ridden a bus before. This is very valuable for us, as we realize that we have managed to give transportation services, however minor, to our sisters. (*Zan-e Rooz* 20 January 1988)

As many of my respondents pointed out, the separate bus space removed not only the “fear of committing sin,” but also the “hassle of competition with men.” In Iran, at least until recently, the order of people lined up to board the bus was not respected. At the bus stop, for example, people would frequently form a disorderly line and thus eventually it would become difficult to figure out what the initial order had been. Upon the bus’s arrival, men and women would run toward the bus door. “Under these circumstances,” Zahra Nouri, one of the (female) deputy mayors of Tehran, explained to me:

The gender segregation plan came as a blessing. Women have to make sure that their chador or head-scarf is not falling off; sometimes they carry a bag, a bunch of books, or their grocery shopping, or a child—or even two. It is difficult to compete with men. So, perhaps the initial planners of gender segregation did not have this in mind, but what I find significant is that with segregation, women had to compete with women and *that* was a blessing. I am talking from experience!

This gradual inclusion of women into public spaces—albeit spaces that were segregated—resulted not just from the initial gender segregation practices of the Islamic Republic, but also from the shifts in social, political, and economic imperatives that increasingly drove women into the spaces of work, education, and consumption, demonstrating the failure of “the ideology of domesticity” (Moghadam 1988). First, Iran’s war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988

compelled women to work. As tens of thousands of adult men were killed or disabled in the war, the number of female-headed households rose. Women household heads could no longer rely on men to do public tasks or earn an income.

In the meantime, the populist considerations of the Islamic state, the religious ideal of charity, the Iran-Iraq war, and the US-led economic sanctions led to the emergence of a welfare state” (Ladier-Fouladi 2002; see also Harris 2013) that provided state-funded social services in different areas, including, but not limited to, health and education. All these services, Marie Ladier-Fouladi (2002) argues, induced changes in the size, structure, and social functions of the family. The fertility rate decreased, the age of first marriage increased, and, following the successful state-funded family-planning program, the annual population growth rate declined from 3.4 percent in 1986 to 1.5 percent in 1996 (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000). These demographic shifts further facilitated women’s entrance into the public spaces of the city.

Additionally, with the end of the war in 1988, President Rafsanjani (1989–97) formed a cabinet composed of developmentalists that embraced free-market economic principles. Following World Bank–inspired structural adjustment policies, Rafsanjani sought to integrate Iran into the global economy. His government drafted the First Development Plan (1989–93), which among other things aimed at activating the industrial sector and partially privatizing some of the state organizations (Shaditalab 2005). This “market fundamentalism” led to an increased demand for women’s employment (Bahramitash 2003a). Thus, during the 1990s, the expansion of spaces of education, work, and consumption, along with the gradual weakening of women’s ties to the domestic sphere, drove women out of their homes and into jobs and schools.

While in 1976, three years prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, 70 percent of women were “housewives,” by 1996 the percentage had declined to 59 percent, which, considering the population growth, means that a large number of women were released into public spaces (Shaditalab 2005). As Kurzman (2008) indicates, from the 1980s to the 1990s, women’s participation in Iran’s labor force rose by a third, and, similar to patterns throughout the Middle East, women’s share of public- and service-sector employment increased rapidly. In conjunction, economic development, state expansion, and oil wealth provided support for women’s increased access to education. By 2006, Iranian women outnumbered men both in secondary and tertiary education.

These circumstances, along with the initial gender segregation plans, led to an increase in the number of women riding the bus to the point that the number of women on a bus was getting closer to the number of men and had become equal during the rush hours. Thus the 1990s could be called the decade of the gradual feminization of public spaces. Quantitative developments brought with them qualitative transformations.

### **Gender-Segregated Busing of the 2000s: Women as Rights-Bearing Citizens**

By the mid-1990s, the officials at the UBCT had already realized that they had to expand women’s share of the bus space. Not only did more women ride buses, but also they developed a sense of entitlement to the women’s section. The women’s section, however little, that was allocated to them had become *theirs*. The complaints expressed in letters to the editor of *Zan-e Rooz* were no longer about the unwarranted and illegitimate physical contact with “brothers,” but about men crossing the boundaries and taking over women’s seats. For instance, in 1996 a female government employee wrote to the magazine:

When we manage to get on the bus we see men sitting in *our* sections and they do not even get up [to give their seats away to women], and so women, in a section that's *theirs*, have to stand on their feet. (Emphasis added.)

Men's presence in these spaces now represented a threat not to women's purity or safety, but rather to their sense of entitlement. Another woman, who regularly rode the bus line to al-Zahra University, a women's university, wrote:

I am a regular on the Valiasr–al-Zahra University bus line. There are many girls' schools on this bus line and at the end of the line we have al-Zahra University. It is obvious that women are the main passengers on this line. . . . I can say with certainty that in most of the hours, only women ride this line. In light of this, the number of chairs allocated to women is extremely unfair. Men have six or seven rows, and women have only two rows. The main problem is not that there are not enough chairs. *The main problem is that there is little space for women and therefore on many occasions women cannot get on the bus while the chairs in the men's section remain empty.* (*Zan-e Rooz* 3 August 1996; emphasis added)

By the late 1990s, not only had women developed a sense of entitlement to these segregated spaces, but they also formulated men's intrusion as a violation of women's rights. By the 2000s, even official language—which in the 1980s had framed gender-segregated busing as part of the state's Islamization project and the maintenance of traditional gender norms—had shifted to highlight the importance of women's rights to separate, comfortable, safe, and religiously pure space. For instance, in 2006, Mohammad Ahmadi Bafandeh, then director of the UBCT, stated:

Unfortunately a number of men who do not respect *women's rights* and are indifferent about the existing rules create problems for women and other passengers by taking seats from the women's section. (*Etemad* 17 December 2006; emphasis added)

Whereas in the republic's early years, public space was marked as masculine and women's presence in it was only grudgingly tolerated through the creation of small, segregated women-only spaces, by the 2000s, state officials spoke of women as having a right to these (segregated) bus spaces and men's intrusion into these spaces as a violation of women's rights. "Respecting" women required that the state accommodate not only Islamic gender norms but also women's need for comfortable and harassment-free rides. Economic necessities made mobility imperative, and gender-segregated busing produced a new, particularly feminine space that allowed that mobility to become viewed as appropriately—and even deservedly—feminine. The UBCT had unknowingly contributed to the transformation of the very social order on the basis of which the initial gender segregation plans had been carried out. By carving out a distinct feminized space within the masculine public space, initially as an exception to the rule, the state enabled women to expand the area within which their movement took place, in effect making the "exception" of women's presence less and less exceptional. By the 2000s, women's presence in public spaces was no longer considered an interruption of, or an exception to, public order. Rather, women had become an integrated part of the public order; their needs had to be accommodated and their rights of access to (bus) space respected.

As the allocated women's space was no longer sufficient and as women demanded more and better bus space, the UBCT, as a state agent, undertook to further expand and improve women's portion of the bus space. In this phase of bus segregation the state reclaimed legitimacy by invoking the need to provide women with a safe and secure access to the city in the name of women's rights. In order to expand women's share of the bus space, the UBCT followed two strategies: the equal division, where possible, of the existing bus space between the two genders and the provision of women-only buses.

#### *Women-Only Buses and Women Bus Drivers*

During the 1980s, in the early years of the Islamic Republic, the UBCT had unsuccessfully attempted to launch women-only buses. As reports published in various magazines indicate, the partially empty women-only buses that passed by the bus stations filled with male passengers left the men frustrated and angry and caused, rather than remedied, the transportation chaos. Men complained that it did not make sense for them to stand in line while a bus gave rides to only a few women (*Zan-e Rooz* 10 November 1989). Bus drivers reported that every time they would reach the beginning of a bus line, they would inevitably get involved in a fight with the impatient male passengers, who could not accept the idea of women-only buses. The UBCT gave up the idea of women-only buses—at least until 1992, when one of the local branches of the UBCT tested the waters again, and in a symbolic move during “women's week,”<sup>31</sup> temporarily hired six women bus drivers to “demonstrate women's ability in driving buses” (*Jomohoori Islami* 28 December 1992). This symbolic move was frowned upon by many people, who raised their concerns about its impropriety, as a letter from a *Zan-e Rooz* reader illustrates:

This act is not respectful to women's esteemed position in our society—exactly the opposite: it is discourteous to them and overlooks their respected position. . . . This act does not demonstrate women's ability in carrying out social affairs, but on the contrary crushes their social and emotional character by imposing on them a difficult task. . . . The Islamic Iran is not a blank page that can be turned into a copy of the decadent West. (Ibid.)

Ultimately, the local branches initiative to launch women-only buses was suspended.

Nevertheless, within a decade, during the 2000s, the UBCT revived the idea of women-only buses. In 2003, Mohammad Sarafian, then the director of the UBCT, went as far as announcing that in response to women's needs and demands, the UBCT will “allocate 10 to 20 percent of the buses in different districts of Tehran to women so that they can ride the buses more comfortably” (*Zan-e Rooz* 13 September 2003). But due to the UBCT's own internal institutional conflicts, the women-only buses were never launched. Later that year, Sarafian stated that the limited space at the back of the bus was no longer sufficient for women and thus as “bus segregation is to *accommodate* women and *provide* them with more comfort,” the UBCT has decided that in each bus line, every thirty minutes one bus will transfer only women (*Zan-e Rooz* 5 December 2003; emphasis added). This plan was still impractical, as the gender composition of the bus passengers would change with the time of day and neighborhood. Nonetheless, in contrast to the earlier decades, the UBCT officials acknowledged women's rights of access to comfortable, secure spaces and stated that their demands and needs had to be accommodated. While in the initial phase of segregation during the 1980s, the state defined

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<sup>31</sup> The Women's Week start off by celebrating the birth of Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter.



women as moral subjects, in the second phase of segregation during the early 2000s, the state defined women as citizen-subjects entitled to a safe and comfortable journey through the public spaces of the city. During the initial phase of segregation, women gained access to public spaces, albeit as exceptions to the rule, by mobilizing the terms of a religious morality. During the second phase of segregation, women demanded the expansion and improvement of the spaces that were allocated to them. Their demands were informed by the secular liberal discourse of women's rights to the city.

### **Conclusion: Women as Consumers?**

In 2006, after 24 years of attempts to establish women-only buses, the UBCT once again launched women-only buses, for which it hired women bus drivers. In April 2006, Ahmadi Bafandeh, the new director of the UBCT, announced that

the hiring of women drivers for vans and minibuses is now on the agenda, and effective in June, women will be able to use women-only public transportation vehicles into which *no man has the right to enter*. . . . We have published the call-for-drivers announcement. We aim to provide women with a feeling of security. I am asking people who have the ability to establish private transportation companies to do so and *use women drivers in routes many women take*. (*Sharq* 10 April 2006; emphasis added)

The UBCT's successful launching of women-only buses (in the sense that the plan was not just implemented but also sustained) and the subsequent hiring of women bus drivers only became possible after the UBCT's partial privatization, which took place under the mayorship of Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf in 2005 as part of the state's privatization strategy, which has been in effect since the early 1990s. Ehsani (2009) points out that the privatization of public assets has been a consistent strategy of regime consolidation in Iran since 1979. It has, however, "taken place in waves, always accompanied by a rational justification," he argues:

The privatization of public land in the 1980s was carried out in the name of distributive justice, while the sale of city skyline and the liberalization of zoning laws in the 1990s were presented as the precondition for urban renewal. The current wave of privatization of industrial and financial institutions is framed as the technocratic rationalization of a hopelessly deadlocked economy.

The partial privatization of the UBCT was aimed at assisting the municipality with the equipment of more, and new, buses. In 2006, Neda-ye Behavaran, a private bus company, assisted the UBCT with the launching of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT): fast buses that have limited stops but run frequently on crowded routes and in rush hours. The founding of the BRT and the hiring of women bus drivers did in fact generate much controversy. First of all, the rapid transit buses reversed the position of the women's and men's sections: men sit in the back, women sit in front. Hooman, one of the city experts at the UBCT, told me that "not only had women complained about having to sit at the back of the bus, but it had also come into question from the international community." He is quick to add with a smirk: "I personally don't understand what the difference is. Why is the front space a better space? But anyhow, that has changed now! Rest in peace that on the BRTs men sit at the back."

Since these buses were ten times more expensive than the regular public buses, individual men and women felt they should be able to sit, and so if they found their section full they would often times cross into the other section to find an available seat. Sarah, a thirty-two-year-old journalist tells me: “I pay for my ticket and so I am entitled to that empty seat regardless of the section within which it is located.” In other words, passengers like Sarah have started mobilizing a market logic that gives them the right to take advantage of goods and services as consumers. Thus, some began to worry that due to lack of supervision by the state, the BRTs were turning into a stage for “Satan to dance” as unrelated men and women mingle (*Zan-e Rooz* 24 December 2006). Overall, however, people eventually came to see the BRTs as a relief: they could get to their destinations faster and the new buses were cleaner, more comfortable, and air-conditioned.

Having witnessed the success of the BRTs, the UBCT decided to launch women-only rapid transit buses and to hire women bus drivers for them. While the UBCT still oversees the functioning of Neda-ye Behavaran, it does so less strictly. Thus, as soon as the BRTs were launched, the private company started hiring women drivers. Many of the bus drivers that I interviewed, both men and women, believed that this was merely a “show to encourage people to use the rapid transit buses.” One of the employees at Neda-ye Behavaran told me that as a private company it was only natural to think about profit. “But we also did create opportunities for women,” he adds.

Safarali Ghazian, the UBCT’s public affairs director, described the plan to hire women drivers as an attempt to have women participate in and partially take responsibility for the transportation of women. Ghazian encouraged women to apply for these positions and added:

Women’s participation in this plan would provide us with the incentive to quickly launch these transportation lines. . . . We should wait and see *if women have the courage and the guts to do so or not*. (*Sharq* 10 April 2006; emphasis added)

As Ghazian’s remarks indicate, by the latter half of the 2000s, UBCT officials were referring to women both as citizens with rights and civic responsibilities and as profit-making consumers. The responsibility to protect and provide for women passengers had partially shifted from the state to women as citizens.

Under such circumstances, women mobilized multiple discourses—the Islamic discourse of religious purity, the liberal discourse of women’s rights and entitlement to the city as citizens, and the market discourse of consumer rights—to expand their share of the bus space, and by extension, of the city.

### Chapter 3

#### Access to Freedom Denied! The Ban on Women's Sports Spectatorship and the Politics of Soccer

*As you go . . . along the road to Olympia, before you cross the Alpheius, there is a mountain with high . . . cliffs . . . called Mount Typaeum. It is a law of Elis to cast down it any women who are caught present at the Olympic games, or even on the other side of the Alpheius, on the days prohibited to women.*

“The city of Melbourne glitters in the early evening as the MCG [Melbourne Cricket Ground] prepares to host Australia’s most important football [soccer] match in four years, to be played out in the country’s biggest sporting arena, a colossal venue for a colossal game. It is Australia versus Iran, the second and final leg of a two-legged contest which began in the courtroom of Azadi [Freedom] Stadium in Tehran a week ago. Now Australia will provide its own courtroom, a full house of 98,000 people<sup>1</sup> roaring in full voice as the Socceroos [the official nickname of the Australian national team] attempt to make history.”

These are the opening remarks of Les Murray, Australian soccer analyst, broadcasting live from Melbourne on 29 November 1997.<sup>2</sup> Thirty-one out of the thirty-two spots available in the 1998 FIFA World Cup, the world championship for men’s national association soccer teams, have already been claimed by the qualifying teams. The winner of this match will take the last spot on the list, ensuring its trip to Paris for the final tournament. As the head referee blows his whistle to signal the start of the game, Les Murray claims that Australia is “just ninety minutes away from being among soccer’s elites in the World Cup finals.”

Indeed, as the minutes pass by, Australia gets closer and closer to soccer’s elites club. Seventy-six minutes into the game, Australia still has a 2–0 lead against Iran. Then, as a global audience of more than one billion curiously follows the match, Iran scores its first goal. But Australia still leads the game. Players continue to furiously tackle each other. Attackers constantly attempt to score another goal, Australians aiming to secure their lead, Iranians hoping for a 2–2 tie, which would automatically give Iran the lead on away-goals rules. The ball keeps rolling. Players are panting. The clock is ticking. The ball travels across the soccer field and more than one billion pairs of eyes travel with it. There are only ten minutes left before the referee blows his whistle three times signaling the end of the game. The countdown begins. Les Murray and Johnny Warren, the popular Australian soccer player who had played in Australia’s first and last World Cup appearance in 1974, anxiously get ready to cheer Australia’s entry to the World Cup after twenty-four years. But these last ten minutes are a game-changer, and as the adage goes, “It ain’t over til it’s over.” Against all expectations, Iran makes a comeback. In the blink of an eye, Ali

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<sup>1</sup> FIFA claims 85,000 people; see “Australia vs Iran: Celebration and Heartbreak,” FIFA website, accessed 6 June 2012, <http://www.fifa.com/classicfootball/matches/qualifiers/match=8705/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Australia vs Iran (2:2) WCQ in 1997,” YouTube Video, 2:40:09, posted by “SoccerooVideoArchive,” 2 July 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=PR6NWJDq6b0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=PR6NWJDq6b0).

Daei, a world-renowned center-forward, passes the ball to Khodadad Azizi, who was named the Asian Player of the Year just a few months prior. Khodadad flies toward the goal with the ball glued to his feet, out-sprints the Australian defense, and on a breakaway chips the ball over the goalkeeper and knocks the ball into the goal to end the game at a 2–2 draw. “Disaster for Australia!” shouts Murray, distraught. Warren, openly weeping on the air, says: “In boxing terms they are knocked out!” Australia is denied a place in the finals. Iran makes it to the World Cup after twenty years.

The flapping of Khodadad’s wings in Melbourne caused a tsunami of ecstasy in Tehran, 7,845 miles away from Melbourne. An icon of “disaster” for Australians, Khodadad became a legend on the other side of the globe. Iranians, frenzied and jubilant, poured to the streets screaming for joy and waving the flag. Some were distributing candies and cookies, some blowing their plastic horns, some dancing to a song in their hearts only they could hear, some impersonating Khodadad’s final moves, and some just enthusiastically observing the outburst of emotions that had long been suppressed. Men and women, together, reclaimed the streets of Tehran, turning the city into a gigantic stage for national glory and solidarity. The police, themselves flabbergasted by the magnificent performance of the national team, did not intervene. Tehran was restless that night. Hours after midnight one could hear people honking horns, shouting Khodadad’s name, singing patriotic songs, and playing loud music. The national team had helped bring together a nation, squeezed by the postrevolutionary upheavals, the war, US-led sanctions, tight social control, and political tensions. Men and women, the people and the police, the secular and the religious, the conservatives and the reformists, young and old, with diverse ethnic backgrounds were stitched together by the threads of a national victory.

The next morning, the heroes of the nation were on their way back to Iran. As the city woke up, the state made an announcement demanding that the people of Iran not populate the airport and inviting them to instead attend the welcoming ceremony held at the Freedom Stadium, the biggest sports complex in Iran, located in Tehran. As soon as the announcement was concluded, the stitches that had held the nation together were torn apart. Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, women had been banned from entering the soccer stadium, where the ceremony was being held. While lacking in legal backing, the ban had hardly been publicly questioned.

By setting up Freedom Stadium as a stage where national glory and solidarity could be celebrated, the state had inadvertently magnified an old and long-forgotten scar: the ban on women’s sports spectatorship. In other words, the state unknowingly facilitated the translation of what was once a “private trouble,” a trouble felt at an individual level, to a “public issue”—a collective problem caused by social institutions and structures of a particular historical milieu (Mills 2000, 187). The ban was publicized and had suddenly turned into a “national” problem. The stakes were high: top-level state officials from fifty-five Islamic countries had convened in Tehran for the Eighth Islamic Summit; many women, in groups or as families, were already on their way to Tehran from the surrounding towns eager to welcome the soccer players; Mohammad Khatami, who was elected as the president of Iran on 23 May 1997, just six months prior to the game, had run on a platform of liberalization and reform. And the whole world was watching. All this worked in favor of women. The ban was lifted.

As the gates of Freedom Stadium opened, between three to five thousand women flew in. Women were assigned to a special section. The rest of the stadium was populated by more than 90,000 men. All in harmony, the nation was ready to rise as the soccer players were brought into

the stadium by a helicopter that landed on the green grasses of Freedom soccer field. As the players got off the helicopter, it became difficult to differentiate men's voices from women's as they shouted with joy, "Iran, Iran, Iran!" Nevertheless, the morning after, the ban was reinstated, and women were denied access to Freedom once again.

The shot that Khodadad directed toward the Australian goal had had a butterfly effect. That shot did not just result in a victory for Iran's national soccer team in Melbourne; it also set in motion a chain of events that transformed the relationship between women, the state, and the clerics in Iran. The ban had entered public discussions. Women were let in once, which made some believe that they could be let in again and again, until the ban is lifted forever. Out of the scattered objections of a few feminist journalists to the ban, grew a small but organized feminist campaign called the White Scarf Girls. Occasionally a few women, cross-dressed as men, would attempt to sneak into the stadium, but the White Scarf Girls marked the first official and collective opposition to the ban on Iranian women's sports spectatorship.

Throughout the past three decades, from 1979 to present, women have experimented with different arrangements to win "half of Freedom."<sup>3</sup> They have been able to make some progress, but have not yet won the game. While the clerics emphasize the religious aspect of the ban (i.e., looking at the half-naked bodies of sportsmen is religiously forbidden), the state points to the unfeasibility of lifting the ban due to the horrid—and thus not-women-friendly—atmosphere of sports stadiums. Indeed, as I show in this chapter, women have consistently found themselves caught up in a political game that is fought in their name but in effect is not for them. The players at both the domestic level (the state and the clerics) and the international level (Fédération Internationale de Football Association [FIFA] and the Asian Football Confederation [AFC]) have constantly used women's issues to secure their political authority, which ultimately presents itself as the ability to regulate women's lives and bodies. As the historical narrative presented in this chapter indicates, the clerics' concern about women's religious virtue, the state's emphasis on the protection of women as "delicate" subjects, and FIFA's application of the discourse of women's rights all act as blinders that hide the real operations of power at both the domestic and the international level.

This chapter offers a historical narrative about the developments in the ban on women's sports spectatorship and examines the different historical moments in which the ban was constructed as a "national" problem, thereby offering a space for contestation between women, the state, and the clerics domestically as well as between these three groups, FIFA, and the AFC internationally. It is not my intention to narrate the full history of women's sports and sports spectatorship. Rather, I summarize and contextualize some of the key moments and events through which state power, and various responses to that power, can be understood. The chronicle demonstrates how, during the past three decades, national sports (particularly soccer) have been mobilized at the service of certain political interests. Throughout the chapter, I point out the different strategies that various groups adopted to either transgress or reinforce the spatial boundaries drawn by the state. In doing so, I highlight how each group mobilized the terms of gender, (trans)national politics, and religion to promote or oppose women's rights to sports spectatorship.

An analysis of the developments around women's sports spectatorship implores us to include in our explanations the internal and external dynamics of political power. Instead of reducing the ban on women's sports spectatorship to a crude Islamism, I argue that it is more fruitful and theoretically constructive to look at this case as a microcosm of broader

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<sup>3</sup> The White Scarf Girls' slogan.

developments in political contestations within the Iranian state, between the Iranian state and its different constituencies, and between the Iranian state and the international community. Drawing on the literature on sports and politics, I look at sporting events (here soccer matches) as an arena where political contestations are played out (Frey and Eitzen 1991). I demonstrate how different political groups rally around various gendered discourses to allegedly protect women as moral subjects (protecting their chastity in the name of Islam), as citizens (protecting their physical safety as vulnerable subjects), and as liberal subjects of a global governance (protecting their freedom and autonomy). Taking cues from Partha Chatterjee (1993), I demonstrate how women, their rights, and their bodies are used as a site for the reconstitution of power; this power ultimately presents itself in the form of the regulation of women's presence and movements in such public spaces as the sporting arena.

### **Sports and Politics: Power**

Because of their capacity to be at once national and transnational, sporting events—particularly soccer, one of the world's most popular sports—provide an opportunity to explore political struggles and power dynamics at both the national and the international scales (Frey and Eitzen 1991; Markovitz and Rensmann 2010). Various scholars have investigated how different sociopolitical discourses, which secure different political agendas, are mobilized in the organization of sporting events such as the World Cup (see for example Andrews 2003; L'Etang 2006). Different agents within the political field use sporting events as a site and a moment for establishing their authority, pressing for their cause, or advancing their interests.

States have gone to war over soccer (Sack and Suster 2000), fought for recognition and legitimacy through soccer (Anderson 2011), and crafted national and regional identities based on soccer (Silva and Gerber 2012). They have also used international soccer events for peace-and-conflict-resolution purposes (Sakaedani 2005). On the other hand, scholars have shown that social movements also make use of major sports events to further their cause. Cornelissen (2012), for example, demonstrates how in South Africa various advocacy groups, such as the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU), used their country's hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup as a "strategic entry point" for engagement with the state.

According to FIFA statistics, more than 265 million people around the world play soccer,<sup>4</sup> and more than two billion watch the game.<sup>5</sup> The growing popularity of soccer has not gone unnoticed by traditionally powerful institutions, such as the Roman Catholic Church, and there is a rich and germane literature on Latin American soccer that deals with the relationship between the church and the growing popularity of the secular institution of modern sports. For example, Chester U. Gaitán (2002) demonstrates how, during the nineteenth century in Costa Rica, the church initially consolidated its authority by organizing and directing soccer associations for the purpose of gaining religious followers. However, according to Gaitán, as the attendance fell at church-related activities, the church started to look unfavorably at soccer and felt threatened by its implications for the church's authority.

While it is important to take note of how local and national groups and organizations mobilize around soccer mega-events for various political agendas, the role of such transnational

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<sup>4</sup> Matthias Kunz, "265 Million Playing Football," *FIFA Magazine*, 12 July 2007, accessed 12 July 2013, [http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/fifafacts/bcoffsurv/emaga\\_9384\\_10704.pdf](http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/fifafacts/bcoffsurv/emaga_9384_10704.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "Almost Half the World Tuned in at Home to Watch 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa," FIFA website, 11 July 2011, accessed 12 July 2013, <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/archive/southafrica2010/organisation/media/newsid=1473143/index.html>.

soccer organizations as FIFA in shaping the soccer field should not be overlooked. Established in 1904, FIFA now has 209 members (national associations), with six regional confederations, among them the AFC. Some scholars have demonstrated the ways in which FIFA and its regional committee structure have provided a political platform for some newly independent third world countries to gain visibility and articulate their interests (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998). Others, however, have highlighted the ways in which the FIFA story is intertwined with “the rise and fall and reincarnation of forms of imperialism” (ibid.). Darby (2002), for example, focuses on how FIFA features in the postcolonial exploitation of emergent African nations. Other scholars have pointed out FIFA’s “modernist aspirations” and its promotion of liberal-democratic values (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998, 42).

Throughout this chapter, I demonstrate how during the past three decades, women’s sports spectatorship has been constituted as the site upon which power struggles were waged among various political actors. Drawing from Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), I highlight the various gendered discourses that are implicated in these power struggles, and, moreover, I show that these gendered discourses are ultimately not about women. The gendered discourses of protection, I contend, have provided the various political players with goal-scoring opportunities. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s government used a statement demanding the removal of the ban on women’s sports spectatorship as a way to curb the clerics’ political authority; the clerics used their religious authority to demand the withdrawal of the president’s statement and reclaim their political authority; FIFA and the AFC made “women’s rights” an alibi for undermining the Iranian state’s sovereignty and further vitiating its place within the international community. Women, on the other hand, teamed up with each of these actors at different junctures to press for the removal of the ban.

What follows is a chronological narrative of the dynamics around the ban on women’s sports spectatorship, which continues to this day.

### **Riding the Pine: Rejecting Soccer as a Western Product**

Modern sports were among the many souvenirs that the ruling Qajar elites (1785–1925) brought from their trips to *farang* (Europe). Soccer, however, was introduced to Iranians by the British expatriates residing in Iran, who helped found the first soccer association in 1919 (Chehabi 2002b). Nevertheless, it was the Pahlavi regime (1925–79) that popularized sports as part of its modernization (read Westernization) agenda. Women’s sports in particular provided a perfect site for Iran to display its modernity. Young women wearing shorts and miniskirts were brought in to march in official celebrations and parades, and to greet foreign delegates. In 1935, the Pahlavi regime launched the Ladies’ Center, whose main responsibility was to develop physical education programs for women. Despite the opposition from the clergy, the first women’s national championship was held four years later, in 1939. These developments, while empowering women of the nondevout upper classes (who constituted a very small portion of the population), alienated women with religious backgrounds and/or of the popular classes. In the meantime, the state invested in and promoted men’s soccer, which became increasingly popular. By the 1970s, Iranian sports were gaining momentum in international competitions, and in 1978, the Iranian national soccer team made its first appearance in the World Cup.

In 1979, the country that Jimmy Carter had referred to as “an island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world” was hit by a revolution. The shah was forced to flee Iran and in his place sat Ayatollah Khomeini, a prominent Shi’i cleric and the leader of the revolution, which was marked by its popular, Islamist, and anti-imperialist slogans. Instead of modern competitive

sports, which were associated with the modernization plans of the Pahlavi regime and thus conceived of as a Western product, the Islamic Republic of Iran attempted to revive both traditional sports and local folk games (ibid). At the same time, pursuing a foreign policy motto of “neither East, nor West,” Iran withdrew from the international community and put an end to its participation in most international competitions. Women’s sports were suspended. Men’s sports did not fare well either. For much of the 1980s, Iranian sportsmen and sportswomen were “riding the pine”—sitting on the bench, never getting into a game.

Not only were modern sports frowned upon as a symbol of colonial rule and Westernization, but the budget deficit and the wartime atmosphere of lamentation had also made it impossible for the state to facilitate their growth. Even before the war, funding for sports was pitted against funding that fulfilled the goals of the Islamic revolution. Houshang Chehabi (2002a) notes that in early 1980, in reaction to the national soccer team’s preparation for the Asian Games, a local Islamic propaganda organization published a pamphlet that asked,

Would it not have been better if instead of spending a lot of money on this sort of entertainment, it were spent on sending some of our nation’s young people abroad to acquire skills that our country needs? Would it not have been better if instead of spending this innocent and oppressed nation’s blood on such useless pursuits, clinics were built and villages given electricity? Would it not have been better if instead of clowning around like the British and the Americans in order to “shine” in international arenas, [the players] shone in the company of the brothers of the Construction Jihad in our villages, where the simplest amenities are lacking? Have all our political, economic, and cultural problems been solved that we have turned to sport? (391)

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 put an end to all these disputes. Under such conditions, announced the head of the nation’s Physical Education Organization, there was no reason to hold soccer games. Iran boycotted the Olympic Games in both 1980 and 1984, held respectively in Moscow (the “East”) and in Los Angeles (the “West”). It withdrew from the Asian qualifiers for the 1982 World Cup and refused to participate in the 1986 World Cup because of having to play on neutral ground.<sup>6</sup> The national soccer league, too, was dissolved.

The termination of the war gave the country a chance to breathe. In 1989, a year after the war ended, the national soccer league was reconstituted. And with Rafsanjani in power, a new era in the sporting history of Iran began.

### **Warming Up: Embracing Soccer as a Gateway to the World**

In the early 1990s, the Islamic state switched gears. The state officials recognized and acknowledged the importance of sports in both their competitive and entertaining aspects. In 1993, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei made a statement about the importance of professional sports that helped pave the way for their advancement. He pointed to the significant role of professional and champion athletes in bringing honor and respect to Iran and its Islamic revolution (Chehabi 2002b). The official language was shifting: international sporting competitions were no longer dismissed as the domain of “the British and the Americans,” as they had been during the first decade of the Islamic Republic. Instead, the state had come to conceive

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<sup>6</sup> When the game is played on neutral grounds, the home team shall be designated by mutual agreement. The “home team” is the team on whose grounds the game is played.



of international sporting competitions as opportunities for Iran to mark its return to the international community as a strong and consolidated nation-state.

President Rafsanjani's younger daughter, Faezeh Hashemi, herself a sportswoman and later a member of the Parliament (1996–2000), was among those advocating for women's sports. While promoting women's sports at home, Faezeh Hashemi also had an eye on the international front, where an Islamic Iran could present itself as a model for other Islamic nations. Making use of her (father's) connections in Qom among the high-ranking Shi'i clerics, she got the green light and, in October 1991, convened the First Islamic Countries' Sports Solidarity Congress for Women. During the opening ceremony, Rafsanjani, the keynote speaker, called women's sports an "inevitable necessity" (ibid).

Slowly but surely women were dribbling the ball forward. In July 1994, during the Asian Youth Cup preliminary competitions, the government made an announcement that women could attend the games. The conservative newspapers *Resalat* and *Jomoori Islami* objected on the grounds that the vulgar language of the male soccer fans made sports stadiums an unfitting venue for women and that watching the male soccer players in shorts was also inappropriate for women. Nonetheless, in an attempt backed up by the Presidential Office, on 18 July 1994, the Physical Education Organization assigned a special section of the stadium for five hundred women to attend the games. A year later, however, the weekly sports paper *Palevan* published a fatwa (religious ruling) issued by Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, himself a source of eminence: "An unrelated woman may not look at the naked body of an unrelated man, even if the intent is not deriving lust" (Chehabi 2006, 246). Consequently, the Iranian Soccer Federation repealed its decision.

With the election of Mohammad Khatami on 23 May 1997 and the coming to power of the reformists—former revolutionaries who had been pushed to the political sidelines in the late 1980s—a new era of political liberalization began. The reformist faction that came to power was backed by twenty million popular votes (77 percent) and therefore could claim a popular mandate for its promise to foster a more inclusive polity. The reformist president was the advocate of "dialogue among civilizations" abroad and the promoter of freedom of expression inside the country. Khatami's eight-year presidency was marked by the growing vibrancy of civil society on the one hand and, on the other hand, by increasing adversity and cleavage among different factions within the state and between the government and the clerics, who felt that their authority was undermined by the spread of the reformists' liberal discourse (see Shahrokni 2009).

On 29 November 1997, six months into Khatami's presidency and twenty-eight years after the Iranian soccer team's first and last appearance at the World Cup, the team made history by defeating Australia and winning an entry ticket to the 1998 FIFA World Cup. It was not just this historic victory but also the events that preceded the final match that provided a stage for the buildup of what John Tomlinson (1991, 85) calls "passionate nationalism." People's national identities are not at the forefront of their lived experiences, Tomlinson contends, but when there is a perceived threat, such as in times of war (or, it might be added, in sports competitions), latent notions of national identity become mobilized as nationalism.

On 22 November 1997, prior to his arrival to Tehran for the first leg of the play-off, Terry Venables, the Australian coach, had made negative comments about Iran as "uncivilized." He had expressed concerns about the Australians' health and safety while in Iran, and the Australian national team had gone so far as to bring their own drinking water with them. Iranians' national pride was hurt, as is evident in the comments various players, journalists, and

sports anchors continue to make still, fourteen years after the game. Javad Khiabani, the Iranian sports anchor who accompanied the national team to Australia, writes in his memoirs about two particular moments when he, along with Iranian soccer team, felt “humiliated”: in addition to Terry Venebles’s “racist” comments, he describes how during the opening ceremony before the match, the Australians orchestrated “a performance in which Iran, represented by a buffed-body actor resembling Persian ‘god-king’ Xerxes in the movie *300*,<sup>7</sup> was defeated by Australia, represented by a young Australian woman.”<sup>8</sup> The inadequacy and inferiority of the Iranian national team was depicted not by assigning feminine attributes to it, as is often done to degrade an actor who is performing an act that is usually associated with manhood and masculinity, but by portraying it as an excessive masculinity crushed by a weak and delicate femininity. This, Khiabani states, was “disrespectful.” He adds that the Australians “disrespected the sacred national emblems of Iran, including its flag and its national anthem.”<sup>9</sup>

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Emile Durkheim argues that wounds inflicted upon collective consciousness—here nationalist sentiments—should be healed and the collective consciousness restored. One of the mechanisms involved in wound-healing is to punish the violator. Durkheim defines punishment as a “passionate reaction of graduated intensity that society exercises through the medium of a body acting upon those . . . who have violated certain rules of conduct.” Punishment is, Durkheim contends, “vengeance for something sacred which we vaguely feel is more or less outside and above us.” (1984, 56) “The loss was their [the Australians’] punishment” states Khiabani in his 2007 interview with *Pahlevan* news website. Iran looked to the soccer field as a battleground where it could regain its national dignity and restore its bruised masculinity. Victory on the soccer field meant the superiority of one nation over the other: triumphant, the whole nation reached a state of collective effervescence.

The subsequent discussions around whether or not women should be allowed to participate in the welcoming ceremony held at Freedom Stadium can only be explained against the background of this passionate nationalism. At the heart of public discussions about the ban was the tension between the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 2006) and its fragmented reality (Chatterjee 1993). Mobilizing the fictive inclusivity of the nation, women objected to their exclusion from it in reality. The state, having just invested in this victory to mark its reentry to the international arena, and hosting the Eighth Islamic Summit in Tehran, could not afford to damage its reputation by excluding women from a national ceremony. The temporary lifting of the ban allowed Khatami and his government to signal the beginning of a new era in which the “gates of Freedom” were opened to women. Nevertheless, after the welcoming ceremony, Khatami reinstated the ban, without offering any justification. Years later, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Khatami’s vice president, in a note that he published in *Etemad* (26 April 2006), referred to the opposition Khatami’s administration had faced from the clergy and Supreme Leader’s Office:

I will never forget the day when, in order to welcome the national team after its victory that led to its participation in the World Cup and generated national ecstasy, girls and

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<sup>7</sup> A 2007 American action film which is based on a fictionalized retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae between King Leonidas, who leads 300 Spartans into battle against Persian “god-King” Xerxes and his army of more than 300,000 soldiers.

<sup>8</sup> “Khiabani’s Melbourne Memoires,” *Setareh-ha*, 28 November 2012, accessed 18 June 2013, <http://setarehnews.ir/news-6507.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

boys headed toward [Freedom] Stadium. That evening we, both in the Presidential Office and in the Physical Education Organization, were constantly pressed to remove the girls from the stadium. Instead of expressing joy over that victory we were constantly trying to figure out a way to face these pressures.

Neither Khatami nor his cabinet openly discussed these “pressures” at the time, since he was pursuing a nonconfrontational approach both domestically and internationally. During his presidency, Khatami refused to publicize the tensions within the state. Instead of public confrontation, he strove to reach a compromise through long negotiations and lobbying efforts behind closed doors. In other words, he prioritized maintaining the integrity of the state as a whole and normalizing the relationship between the government, the supreme leader, and the clerics. Instead of bringing the political tensions to civil society, Khatami and the reformists attempted to build a strong base within civil society and to turn the political arena into a space where civil society problems could be addressed. Various government officials in their public lectures and statements publicized the ban on women’s sports spectatorship as a “problem,” but they never openly referred to the target of their criticisms or the sources of this “problem.” In 2004, at a public gathering, Khatami blamed “society’s internalized mentality” for the “discriminations” that women faced for their sporting activities (*Javan* 9 July 2004). Fatemeh Rakei, then the head of the Women and Family Committee in the Sixth Parliament, identified the “Talibani approach of some groups” as the source of the problem:

Limiting women’s access [to sports stadiums] is as irrational as limiting their access to streets, parks, and cinemas. These prohibitions have their roots in some traditional and restrictive approaches to women. Some [groups], with their Talibani mentality, if given the opportunity, will keep the Iranian women inside the homes like the Afghan women (*Aftab Yazd* 28 February 2001).

Notably, Rakei mobilizes the discourse of the war on terror, which as Abu-Lughod (2002, 784) has argued, divides the world into “the West” and the “Muslim rest” and then equates the latter with “Taliban-and-the-terrorists” (who in turn are “cultural monsters”), as a way to demarcate the boundaries between different interpretations of Islam within a particular Islamic society. In other words, the very discourse that has been used in the West to create Islam as the “other” and that undermines the heterogeneity of Islam, is invoked in a process of domestic “othering.” Rakei’s speech points to some deep-rooted conflicts among various interpretations of Islam.

Government officials and civil society activists did not just criticize those who blocked the removal of the ban; they also attempted to garner support for the removal of the ban by formulating women’s right of entry to Freedom Stadium in terms of the collective good. In her 2001 interview with *Javan* (30 June 2011), Elaheh Koolaei, a reformist female MP, speaking in favor of women’s entrance to the sports stadiums, mentioned that “this would help both to fulfill women’s need for leisure and to soften the [masculine] space of the stadiums.” Echoing Koolaei, the Physical Education Organization security director, Behzad Katiraei, stated that one of the reasons that the horrid and rowdy space of the sports stadiums cannot be controlled is that “families—including women—are not present.” In his opinion, transforming the sports stadium into a family space would help diminish the security problems and incidents that happen during and after each match. Meanwhile, Khadijeh Sepanji, the head of the Women’s Soccer

Association, attempted to rally support for women to enter sports stadiums as “mothers of the players,” and Tahereh Rezazadeh, another reformist female MP, justified their presence in terms of their “membership in the nation.” Women appeared in these statements not as individuals with rights but as members of the family or the nation. In an attempt to reach a compromise with the clerics and the more conservative factions of society, the reformist politicians and government officials substituted the language of women’s rights with the language of the common good, stripped women of their individuality, and instead demanded their access to Freedom Stadium as part of the community. Nevertheless, the demand for women to be able to enter sports stadiums was not widespread. The ban was only of concern to a small segment of the female population in Tehran, limited mostly to feminist circles. But the debates of the 1990s were merely a warm up for the political contestations that were to come in the next decade.

### **The Kick-Off: Soccer as the Domestic Political Battlefield**

The kick-off to the political game that was played out on the soccer field took place during the early 2000s, toward the end of Khatami’s first term. By then, the ban on women’s sports spectatorship had become a matter of public discussion. Loosening social controls, Khatami’s reformist government had quietly suspended the ban on women’s sports spectatorship on almost all sports, but not soccer and wrestling. In order not to provoke the clerics and the conservatives, they deliberately avoided media publicity. In 2010, during my fieldwork, I attended several matches at national basketball and volleyball tournaments, alongside tens and sometimes hundreds of other women (depending on the importance of the match). Inside the stadium, the TV cameramen informed me that they had received instructions not to transmit any images of women so as not to incite a reaction from the clerics. Thus they had their cameras facing away from women. “Out of sight, out of mind!” said one cameraman jokingly. In order to be able to maneuver between two of its radically different constituencies, the clerics and the young Tehrani women with rising expectations and “a sharp consciousness of injustice, of social inequity between the sexes” (Kurzman 2008), the state had settled on suspending the ban in some areas but keeping women out of sight, off the record.

The next time women could advance the ball down the field toward the opponent’s goal came during the final months of Khatami’s second term. Iran was facing Bahrain for the 2006 World Cup qualifiers, and the match was to be held in Tehran on 8 June 2005—a week before the 2005 presidential elections. Foreign reporters had flooded into the country to cover both the World Cup qualifiers and the election campaigns. Spending his last months in the Presidential Office, Khatami was under pressure from activists in women’s movements and his reformist allies to make a symbolic historic move by officially eliminating the ban on women’s sports spectatorship and championing women’s rights. At the same time, the elections, together with the game, had provided an opportunity structure for various social movements to further their cause and for the presidential candidates to gain popularity.

In his electoral speech, Rafsanjani, running again as a presidential candidate after having served from 1989 to 1997, both underlined the importance of shari‘a restrictions and suggested that women, “while observing [religious and ethical] principles, could be present inside the stadiums” (*Iran* 1 May 2006). Mostafa Tajzadeh, a member of Mosharekat Party’s steering committee, stated in an interview with *Toseh* (5 May 2005), “Today our women are prohibited from entering the stadium, a prohibition that does not have any basis in shari‘a. It will only be a few years before this issue is resolved and not used as an electoral slogan.” In the meantime, the conservatives continued to oppose women’s sports spectatorship. Their reasons clustered around

two themes: that the stadiums lack security and that the removal of the ban was not a priority issue. Criticizing Rafsanjani's backing of women's entrance into the stadiums, *Siasat-e Rooz*, a conservative newspaper, published a note reminding Rafsanjani of the "inappropriateness" of the stadium space:

It is necessary that we remind [Rafsanjani] that inside soccer stadiums the most famous and popular of our soccer players, such as Ali Daei, are the target of the worst insults by the soccer fans. Many get injured in the crowd and in their rush for seating. How could you even demand that women be present in such stadiums? (4 May 2005)

While it might seem that only conservatives opposed women's presence inside the stadiums, it is important to note that while the conservatives highlighted the rowdy behavior of male soccer fans to score political points against the reformists during the presidential campaigns, the majority of the women that I spoke to were not enthusiastic about attending soccer matches at Freedom Stadium. For example, Elmira, a twenty-four-year-old student of architecture told me:

I love soccer but never in my wildest dreams have I thought of going to Freedom [Stadium]. Freedom is for a bunch of low-class hooligans. I know it's fun to be there. I love to be part of a Mexican Wave. But no! With these fans, I'd rather watch the game at home with my friends.

Similarly, Banafsheh Alabi, the goalkeeper of Peykan women's futsal team and a soccer fan herself, said in an interview with *Iran* (7 June 2005):

Especially during a sensitive match, the male fans use so many curse words and insulting words that even if I were a boy I would not want to go to the stadiums. . . . It is one of my wishes to be able to attend a soccer match; however, if this wish were to be realized, I would want to do so in a safe and comfortable environment.

Nevertheless, the pressure to lift the ban on women's soccer spectatorship was growing. The match with Bahrain marked the official formation of the White Scarf Girls Campaign, which demanded "half of Freedom for women." A dozen feminist journalists along with several women's rights activists, some of whom were interested in attending soccer matches and some of whom found in this ban a symbolic opportunity to challenge the state's regulation of women's public presence in general, activated their support network within the state. Many of the reformist presses were already run by the reformist members of the administration and the Parliament. Thus, the campaign was able to orchestrate the publication of a series of opinion pieces that not only questioned the ban and demanded equal access to Freedom Stadium, but also encouraged women to join the campaign in front of the gates of Freedom in order to attend the match between Iran and Bahrain. Khatami's two female cabinet members, Zahra Shojaei, the presidential adviser on women's affairs, and Masoomeh Ebtekar, the head of the Environment Protection Organization, offered their support and lobbied with other authorities to pave the way for women's entrance to Freedom Stadium.

Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Khatami's vice president, later revealed that despite the cabinet's efforts to reach an agreement with the clerics and their representatives, the clerics refused to offer their support and instead threatened that to declare the government religiously illegitimate.

Following his nonconfrontational approach, Khatami, instead of officially removing the ban, settled for the symbolic gesture of taking Shojaee and Ebtekar to the game. Similarly, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, then the head of Physical Education Organization and a presidential candidate, exploited the advantages of his position and took a group of twenty female employees to the VIP section and made them hold his campaign banners and placards. Different groups and individuals used the publicity opportunity the soccer match provided to rally support and push their agenda to the fore.

Meanwhile, the White Scarf Girls, together with a group of fifty women who had responded to their call, gathered in front of the stadium, blocking the pathway where Bahraini cars were bringing in the players and holding up placards that read, “Women’s Right, Half of the Freedom.” The police tried to intervene and make them scatter, but they rushed toward the gate, trying to force themselves in. Their strategy was effective in that they managed to attract the attention of the foreign reporters, who were quick to report both on the ban and on the women’s clash with the police. With these foreign reports, the ban, previously formulated as a domestic problem, shifted to an issue of international scale. Eventually (only after the first half of the game was over), President Khatami and his staff received the reports about the chaos outside the stadium gates, at which point the president demanded that the White Scarf Girls be let in.

Khatami’s era, however, ended a month later with no official permission for women to enter the stadiums. These unsuccessful attempts left traces of disillusionment among women’s rights and other political activists.

### **Bicycle-Kick Goal: Using Soccer against the Clergy**

Raising eyebrows all around, on 26 April 2006, a year into his presidency, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad scored a bicycle-kick goal<sup>10</sup> against the clerics. He reversed the ban that was in place and in a directive sent to the Physical Education Organization, demanded that a special section be reserved for women, so as to create a “healthier atmosphere” at stadiums. It was a step unprecedented in the thirty-year history of the Islamic Republic. His predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, the self-described reformist who rode a wave of support from women, had refused to officially remove the ban, fearing that this act might alienate the clerics in Qom. Ahmadinejad’s directive seemed not only out of character, but also out of step with political reality in the Islamic Republic. His political opponents among reformists and feminists and his supporters among the conservative clergy were similarly surprised and suspicious of his intentions.

In his letter to the head of the Physical Education Organization, Ahmadinejad wrote:

As you are aware, the final soccer matches are extremely popular. Especially during sensitive national matches and major league matches, millions watch the games and tens of thousands, including families, who are interested in and enthusiastic about the game come together to watch the games inside the stadium. Contrary to the common perception and some groups’ propaganda, experience has shown that a large presence of women in public spaces guarantees the prevalence of safety, ethics, and chastity within these spaces. Women have been present on the frontline of all the major events in recent decades. Today they are the epitome of a presence that not only is lively and constructive but also preserves the values and sacredness of women and their particular

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<sup>10</sup> In soccer, a bicycle-kick goal entails a backflip-like movement in which a player kicks the ball in the opposite direction from the direction he is facing.

responsibilities. Thus, it is necessary that for both national and important matches, the organization, taking into account our esteemed women's dignity, assigns one of the most desirable sections inside the stadium to women and families. I am certain that our cherished women, who are the guardians of women's chastity and dignity and who have, in all stages, supported the Islamic revolution, today, too, will be the vanguards of creating a healthy and safe social environment inside the stadiums (*Keyhan* 28 April 2006).

His directive created much controversy. It misses the point to scrutinize it, as some quickly did, for evidence of budding but slyly downplayed antiwoman tendencies within his government and among its conservative backers (Shahrokni 2010). Rather than signaling the new government's approach to women's issues, it indicated Ahmadinejad's attempt to declare his independence from the clergy and the traditional conservatives. At the same time, the directive signaled a new face of his administration to the world. It was aimed at ameliorating the escalating international pressure on Iran both because of Ahmadinejad's controversial statements about Israel, six months prior, and because of intensifying disputes about Iran's nuclear program.

Not surprisingly, the announcement of the directive on Iranian state television created something of an uproar among the clerics in Qom, who saw the step toward as encroaching upon their power.<sup>11</sup> The clerics made their distress known in private meetings and through their public platforms in mosques and elected office. Mobilizing their religious authority, they dismissed the directive as "un-Islamic." Mohammad Taqi Rahbar, the Friday prayer imam of Isfahan and also Isfahan's representative in the Parliament, declared that according to shari'a, "just as it is forbidden for men to look at women's naked body, it is forbidden for Muslim women to look at men's naked legs" (*Sharq* 27 April 2006). Similarly, Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani, one of the sources of eminence, emphasized that "a woman's looking at a man's body, even if not out of lust or for pleasure, is not permitted." But he went further to express his concerns about the "mingling of men and women inside the sports stadiums," which according to him would be "inevitable" in public sports spaces (*Jomhoori Islami* 27 April 2006).

Conservative newspapers listed the names of the sources of eminence who had objected to the directive, demanding that the president respect their fatwas and withdraw his statement. Ayatollah Ostadi, the Friday prayer imam of Qom, criticized the state television for announcing the news about the president's decision to remove the ban but not covering the objections raised by the sources of eminence and other clerics in Qom (*Abrar* 6 May 2006).

Boushehr MP Shokrollah Attarzadeh suggested that "Mr. Ahmadinejad should be humble enough to accept his wrongdoing, obey the *hawza* (seminary center for the training of Shi'a clerics) and the clergy, and revoke his statement" (*Sharq* 2 May 2006). Similarly, Ali Abbaspour, the head of the Education and Research Commission in the Parliament, reminded Ahmadinejad that "in occasions that there is discrepancy between the *hawza* and the clergy on the one hand, and the government on the other hand, it is the clergy's approach that should be taken into account" (*Aftab Yazd* 3 May 2006).

The president, however, seemed determined to stand by his words and despite all the pressures did not revoke his statements. The high-ranking clerics were riled, to say the least, that they had not been consulted about the decision and that even after they expressed their disapproval, Ahmadinejad did not pay attention. Fearing the total eclipse of their authority, they

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Slackman, "Iran Chief Eclipses Power of Clerics," *World Security Network*, 27 May 2006, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/Other/Slackman-Michael/Iran-Chief-Eclipses-Power-of-Clerics>.

condemned the government for “promoting Islam minus the clergy” (*Sharq* 8 May 2006). Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani, one of the high-ranked clerics in Qom, asked, distraught, in an interview: “Have the lawmakers in this country become self-sufficient in extracting the religious opinion? Since when does the Islamic Republic of Iran make such sensitive decisions without consulting with the clergy?” (*Etemad* 7 May 2006).

Totally missing from these disputes was the status of women and the fate of their right to sports spectatorship. The clerics and the students of *hawza* were more concerned about Ahmadinejad’s confrontational approach and feared that if they showed no reaction, then “this kind of behavior would persist and become institutionalized” (*Jomhoori Islami* 27 April 2006). Students of *howza* organized several gatherings in opposition to the government, threatening to withdraw their support for the government that had come to power through their backing (Ibid). The Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom dedicated one of its regional meetings to discuss the problematic character of women’s entrance into sports stadiums. Yet in none of the reports or statements that were published in the aftermath of their convention did the clerics engage with the question of women’s entrance into the stadium. Rather, their final statement harshly criticized the government and expressed their regrets and concerns about the president’s recent moves. The three representatives of Qom in the Parliament also wrote a letter to the president requesting the annulment of the statement (*Sharq* 2 May 2006):

We say this with good intentions that these kinds of decisions will leave the selfless friends of the revolution with a sour taste and a broken heart. As representatives of Qom, the city of *jihad* (a Muslim’s duty to struggle for a just cause) and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning and decision making process in Islamic law), we expect you to boldly revoke your statement and respond to the concerns. You should look to the ingenious and authentic friends of Islam and the revolution and not to your advisers who make these decisions on your behalf. This could seriously undermine your praiseworthy efforts in implementing Islamic rule and in serving the poor.

But Ahmadinejad seemed to be quite willing to antagonize the clergy. He appeared to be motivated at least in part by a recognition that relying on clerics to serve as the public face of the government had undermined the credibility of both. The controversy came to an end only when Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader, intervened to ask Ahmadinejad to retract his statements.

This open confrontation with the clerics had the following three implications: First, it led to the marginalization of the clerics and the curtailment of their formerly unquestionable authority over the central government. By postponing the annulment of his decision, Ahmadinejad demonstrated to the clerics and the sources of eminence that after victory in the elections, their opinion will not be important and that unless the supreme leader intervenes, their fatwas will have no effect on the government’s decisions. Second, by pitting the clerics and “their impenetrable fatwas” against women, it allowed Ahmadinejad to transfer the blame for the discrimination to the clerics (*Sedaye Edalat* 14 May 2006), ultimately contributing to the reproduction of the comfortably accepted assumption about how Islam and the clerics hinder the improvement of women’s status. Third, it underscored the tension between religious institutions and state (political) institutions. In a public statement, Mehdi Koochakzadeh, a conservative MP close to Ahmadinejad, drew a line between fatwas and laws and emphasized (*Aftab Yazd* 27 April 2006):



Only the Parliament can through the passage of laws prohibit women from entering the stadiums. We cannot do this with the fatwas of the sources of eminence. Their fatwas are to be respected and observed by *their* followers [and not all citizens; emphasis added]. Thus, if sources of eminence, the MPs, and the officials believe that because of our customs it is not appropriate for women to enter the stadium and that they should be banned from doing so, they would have to ask the Parliament to pass a law, and then whoever breaches the law could be punished.

Ali Akbar Javanfekr, the president's press adviser, highlighted another aspect of this tension: "The concerns raised and expressed by the clerics [*ulama*] and the sources of eminence are seriously considered by the government, but there are legal hierarchies and procedures that should also be taken into account" (*Jomhoori Islami* 7 May 2006) Here Javanfekr is pointing out the diverging priorities of the sources of eminence and the government. The conservative newspaper *Abrar* (24 May 2006) reported that in a private gathering Ahmadinejad had "told some of the people in his circle that 'these gentlemen [the clerics] should take a walk in the street to realize what's going on.'" Such statements underscored the irrelevance of religious rulings to people's everyday lives and demands.

Ahmadinejad and his cabinet members further diminished the clerics' authority by highlighting the remoteness of their opinions and statements from the day-to-day concerns of a government that was trying to "navigate international pressure, counter Western negative propaganda and conspiracy to initiate a war against Iran." For example, Mohammad Naser Biriya, the president's advisor in clergy affairs, at a conference held at one of the provincial branches of the Islamic Propaganda Organization, stated (*Mardomsalari* 8 July 2006):

We [the administration] arrived at this decision [to remove the ban on women's sports spectatorship] was to counter the enemy's plot of war. It was a positive decision. We had been informed that some groups had recorded images of women cross-dressed as men, who had attempted to sneak into the stadium. The foreign TV stations had planned to show these images during the World Cup matches. On the other hand, we had heard that the United States is planning to use lack of freedom as an excuse to wage a war against our country. In order to counter these plans we came up with the decision to remove the ban on women's sports spectatorship.

Reacting to the above statement and trying to protect the clerics' privileged position, Seyyed Reza Akrami, of the Militant Clergy Association, stated in an interview that the government should not submit to foreign pressure "even if it results to the dismissal of Iran from international competitions." Speaking to a reporter from *Etemad Daily* (9 July 2006), Akrami had added: "When, in West, they remove the marriage ban for priests, cardinals, bishops and nuns, we will also remove the ban on women to enter sports stadiums."

Political pickering aside, Ahmadinejad and his administration did in fact seek to free the government from the clergy and carve out an autonomous space for politics. Several times, during his term in office (2005–13), Ahmadinejad surprised his supporters and opponents alike

by kicking the ball in the opposite direction from the direction he was facing and scoring bicycle-kick-goals against the clerics.<sup>12</sup>

Scoring goals at home, Ahmadinejad did in fact face and further provoked international hostility which indicates why he rallied the ban against women's sports spectatorship to ease the international tensions that had amplified partly due to his earlier actions and statements.

### **Laying the Ball Off: Soccer and International Relations**

Two months into his presidency and six months prior to his directive about the removal of the ban on women's sports spectatorship, on 25 October 2005, speaking to an audience of about four thousand students at "The World without Zionism" event, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had described Israel as a "disgraceful blot" that should be "wiped off the map."<sup>13</sup> His speech had ramifications: First, it sparked outrage around the globe, particularly in the United States. The White House used this occasion to underscore its concerns about Iran's nuclear intentions and the news reports revealed that, under the Bush administration, the neoconservatives were actively planning a war against Iran.<sup>14</sup>

Second, defeating Bahrain in the qualifying matches, Iran had once again won the entry ticket to the World Cup. The 2006 World Cup was held from June to July 2006 in Germany and Ahmadinejad had expressed interest in attending the soccer ball extravaganza. In response, some German authorities lobbied against him and demanded that he would not be given the permit to enter Germany. Bavarian state interior minister, Gunther Beckstein, stated that the demonstration was targeted against "a criminal like Ahmadinejad . . . a man who ha[d] placed himself outside civilization." That the Iranian vice president, Mohammad Aliabadi, had already been granted visa was referred to as "scandalous" by some TV presenters.<sup>15</sup> Ahmadinejad's reaction to the international uproar was similar to his reaction to the clerics. He stood by previous statements questioning the Holocaust, watched the World Cup matches from his TV in Tehran and said that he "was not at all surprised" because he was aware that "there is a very active worldwide network of Zionists, also in Europe."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as his adviser in clergy affairs, quoted earlier, indicated Ahmadinejad's directive to remove the ban on women's sports spectatorship was an attempt to navigate these tensions and ameliorate the hostile environment prior to the start of the World Cup matches.

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<sup>12</sup> For example on 16 August 2009, Ahmadinejad announced that he would nominate at least three women to be ministers in the new cabinet. It was a step unprecedented in the thirty-year history of the Islamic Republic, whose backers in the conservative clergy regard the concept of women in high office as contrary to God's will. See Shahrokni 2009.

<sup>13</sup> "Israel Should Be Wiped off Map, Says Iran's President," *Guardian*, 26 October 2005. There are controversies about what Ahmadinejad actually said in Farsi and what the connotations of what he said are in the original language. For an extensive overview of these controversies, see Juan Cole, "Ahmadinejad: 'I am not anti-Semitic,'" *Informed Comment: Thoughts on the Middle East, History and Religion*, 26 June 2007, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.juancole.com/2007/06/ahmadinejad-i-am-not-anti-semitic.html>; J. Steele, "Lost in Translation," *Guardian*, 14 June 2006, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/jun/14/post155>; Glenn Kessler, "Did Ahmadinejad Really Say Israel Should Be 'Wiped off the Map'?" *Washington Post*, 5 October 2011, accessed 12 June 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/did-ahmadinejad-really-say-israel-should-be-wiped-off-the-map/2011/10/04/gIQABJKML\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/did-ahmadinejad-really-say-israel-should-be-wiped-off-the-map/2011/10/04/gIQABJKML_blog.html).

<sup>14</sup> William Clark, "The Real Reasons Why Iran Is the Next Target: The Emerging Euro-denominated International Oil Maker," Centre for Global Research website, 27 October 2004, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/CLA410A.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Germans Protest against Ahmadinejad, Racism as Cup Opens," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 June 2006, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.dw.de/germans-protest-against-ahmadinejad-racism-as-cup-opens/a-2051820>.

<sup>16</sup> *Guardian*, 28 May 2006.

As events unfolded, it became obvious that a new round of animosity between Iran and the West has begun. While Khatami and his predecessor, Rafsanjani, had attempted to reintegrate Iran into the international community and greet the world with a friendly face, Ahmadinejad's comments about Israel and the Holocaust, which coincided with the United States Senate's adopting a regime change policy toward Iran, turned the clock back to the earlier years of the Islamic Republic. Ahmadinejad was labeled "the Hitler of the 21st century" by Germans who orchestrated a demonstration against him ahead of the World Cup match between Iran and Mexico. Carrying and waving Israeli flags, the protesters chanted pro-Israel slogans and held signs that read "Give Ahmadinejad a red card."<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Jafar Panahi, an internationally acclaimed Iranian filmmaker, inspired by an incident in which his daughter was refused entry to the soccer stadium, made the movie *Offside* (2006), which depicts the story of a group of young Iranian women who disguise themselves as men and sneak into Freedom Stadium to watch the World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain. Panahi pointed out in one of his interviews that he used the soccer match "as a metaphor to show the discrimination against women on a larger scale."<sup>18</sup> Banned from being shown in Iran, *Offside* premiered at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival, prior to the World Cup championship game and was awarded the Silver Bear Jury Grand Prix. Iran was shamed on the international stage, yet once again.

These developments although gave wider publicity to The White Scarf Girls' cause, did not grant them access to Freedom. Nevertheless, taking advantage of the turbulent international relations and setting their hopes on the international sport organizations, The White Scarf Girls kicked the ball into the international arena for FIFA and AFC to gain control of it. By laying off the pass to FIFA, AFC and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), The White Scarf Girls attempted to set them up as their teammates and form transnational support networks. As their first step, they wrote a letter for these three organizations. The letter was described by *Jomhoori Islami* (21 August 2006), a conservative newspaper, as an invitation for "foreign intervention into [Iran's] domestic affairs" that would undermine Iran's sovereignty. In the letter, The White Scarf Girls had requested that these international sport organizations step in to terminate "gender discrimination" and to "protect Iranian women's rights."

During the past two year we have tried to convince the Iranian sports authorities that they should respect *our* [women's] *rights as citizens* and not to ban us from attending soccer matches inside the stadiums. In return, however, not only have the authorities not provided us with the opportunity to watch the matches, but that they have also confiscated our cameras and personal belongings and have even arrested some of our members. Their excuse for such an obvious form of gender discrimination is that women's safety and security cannot be guaranteed inside the stadiums. While this statement seems to apply to all women, it is important to note that non-Iranian women are allowed to freely enter and wander around Freedom Stadium. We believe that gender discrimination is, under no circumstances, justifiable and that if, as sports authorities claim, the problem is women's lack of security inside the stadium, then we expect that the Iranian soccer authorities make necessary provisions in this regard. Considering all

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<sup>17</sup> "'The Hitler of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:' German Jews give Ahmadinejad the Red Card," *Spiegel Online International*, 11 June 2006, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/the-hitler-of-the-21st-century-german-jews-give-ahmadinejad-the-red-card-a-420760.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "Iranian Women in Panahi's Film, Move beyond a Boundary," *Global Game*, 28 March 2007, accessed 12 June 2013, <http://www.theglobalgame.com/blog/2007/03/offside-trap-iranian-women-in-panahis-film-move-beyond-a-boundary/>.

this, we demand that you investigate the issue and use your authority to end gender discrimination against female football fans [in Iran]. (Emphasis added.)

With this letter, international sporting organizations joined the game. In the name of protecting Iranian women's rights, these organizations put pressure on Iran to remove the ban and threatened to refuse giving Iran the privilege of hosting international competitions. As was indicated in a 2007 report published by *Etemade Melli*, a reformist newspaper, "after thirty years the Islamic Republic of Iran ha[d] reached a point where it [had become] inevitable not to respond to the key questions that were raised in social, cultural and political arenas." The report went on to suggest that "as a modern religious state, it [was] necessary that Iran m[et] the expectations set forth by both its various constituencies and by the Muslim world," highlighting once again Iran's ambition to partake a leading role in the "Muslim world" (21 August 2007).

Following the letter, the AFC demanded that Iran comply with AFC regulations, remove the ban and demonstrate its commitment to the "no discrimination" rule that is shared and respected by all the members of the AFC and FIFA. Mohammad Bin Hammam, then the head of the AFC, stated that in his opinion the ban on women to attend soccer matches was "a sign of [gender] discrimination." "All I can say," he was quoted in news report published by *Etemade Melli* (24 August 2008), "is that if Iran was to ever host one of the AFC tournaments, they will have to give permission to women to attend the matches."

Ali Kaffashian, then the head of the Iranian Soccer Federation, stated that Iran was "fully ready to follow all the requirements and instructions from the AFC." Considering the protests inside the country, however, Iran reached a compromise with the AFC and FIFA. While Iranian women are still kept behind the grates of Freedom, foreign women are now allowed to attend international soccer matches that take place in Iran. In 2011, in an ironic turn of events, FIFA and the AFC, the very organizations that stepped in to protect Iranian women's autonomy against the state and demanded respect for women's right to attend soccer matches as fans, banned the Iranian national women's team from playing in an Olympic qualifying game because their players were wearing hijab. The team was literally minutes away from entering the field when they were told they could not play. FIFA justified the ban both on the basis of regulations that outlaw the presence of "politics or religion" on uniforms and on the basis of claims regulations that outlaw any piece of clothing that jeopardizes the players' safety. Mobilizing the logic of masculinist protection, Iranian women were yet again prohibited from attending soccer matches, this time as players. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad referred to FIFA officials as "dictators" and "colonialists" who intend to "impost their lifestyle on others." Just as the officials at FIFA and the AFC had promised The White Scarf Girls to protect their rights and to guard their autonomy against the encroachments of the Iranian state, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promised women "to deal with those who carried out this ugly job" and to "follow and protect the rights of [his] girls."<sup>19</sup>

In the meantime, as the Iranian government and the international soccer organizations were flexing their muscles by demonstrating their ability to protect "their girls" from the abuses and violation of their rights by "others," Iranian women were kept outside the soccer field and the doors of freedom were shut in their faces both at home and abroad.

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<sup>19</sup> James Dorsey, "Muslim Players Win Hijab Battle in Their Struggle for Women's Rights," *Huffpost Sports*, 7 March 2012, accessed 12 June 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-dorsey/iran-womens-soccer-hijab\\_b\\_1318549.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-dorsey/iran-womens-soccer-hijab_b_1318549.html).

## Follow-Through<sup>20</sup>: Offside and Out-of-Sight

In this chapter I have brought under inquiry yet another site of gender segregation: Freedom Stadium, the largest national sports complex located in Tehran. I have offered a historical narrative about the ban on women's sports spectatorship and examined the different historical moments in which the ban on women became a national—and international—problem offering a space for contestation between the Iranian state and multiple parties both at the domestic level (i.e., women and the clerics) and at the international level (i.e., FIFA, AFC). Drawing on the literature on sports and politics, I theorized international sports (soccer) tournaments as spaces where competing political interests are enacted and fought for.

The chronicle demonstrates how during the past three decades, Freedom Stadium has been mobilized as a site for both celebrating and challenging the nation as an all-encompassing entity. Throughout years, different groups have adopted various strategies to both transgress and reinforce the spatial boundaries set by the Iranian state. The chapter highlights how each group mobilized the terms of gender, national politics and religion to promote or oppose women's right of access to Freedom. I situate Freedom Stadium and the struggles around it within the broader socio-political context and demonstrate how the functions and purposes that it serves have shifted over time.

As was the case with the previous two chapters, tracing the transformations within and the developments around these spaces sheds light on the transformations of the Iranian state. While the previous two cases, women-only parks and segregated buses, highlighted a shift in the state power from the application of prohibitive measures to productive ones, Freedom Stadium serves as a negative case in which this shift has not occurred. Women are still prohibited from attending men's soccer matches. However, similar to the other two cases, while throughout the first decade of the Islamic Republic the ban on women's sports spectatorship remained a non-issue, by the 2000s, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, the ban had already become problematic (due to the pressures from feminist activists and *FIFA*) and one of the solutions offered by the state was to produce all-women sections inside the stadiums to enable their inclusion within this space. Similarly, the ban that was once justified under religious terms is now justified by resorting to discourses of safety and security. Additionally, Islamic morality once presented by the government as the justification for the ban is now presented as an obstacle to its removal. In other words, in contrast to the other two cases where the government managed to rationalize its policy by adopting a discourse that speaks to all the parties involved, due to the lack of a modern authoritative discourse that would tie women's right to sports spectatorship to collective good, the state did not manage to complete its shift from prohibition to production. In other words, not only the state was able to formulate women's exercise and commute in the city as necessary for the better functioning of the society, but women too expressed their need and desire to freely exercise in the parks and comfortably move across the city. As far as sports spectatorship is concerned only a small group of feminist activists expressed their desire to attend the matches and they too failed to mobilize a wider range of women.

The political game played on the soccer field was thoroughly gendered. The Iranian state and the clerics, along with the international sporting organizations fought to secure their sovereignty or to undermine the other's. The struggle for sovereignty demonstrated itself in the form of the attempt to gain control over [Iranian] women's bodies and the rules that regulate

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<sup>20</sup> The continued forward movement of the leg after the ball has been released. It is very important to carry this out in the direction of the target when taking a shot on goal.

their movements in public spaces such as sporting arenas. Ultimately all teams and players scored a goal in this game except the Iranian women in whose name the game was designed in the first place.

Struggling to maintain its sovereignty both nationally and internationally, the Iranian state made a compromise with FIFA and the AFC to open the gates of Freedom foreign women only. Those of the Iranian women who are interested in attending sports matches continue to disguise themselves as men and sneak into the stadium. They remain in “offside” and if caught by the guards will be given a red card and expelled from the field. For all the other sports, female fans continuously negotiate and lobby with local state officials who arbitrarily lift or reinforce the ban. As I mentioned earlier, except for soccer and wrestling, I was able to attend many other sporting tournaments such as volleyball, basketball, badminton and tennis. In order to keep the clerics satisfied however female fans are continuously kept out of sight.

## **Conclusion**

### **The Global Surge in Gender Segregation**

This dissertation used gender segregated spaces as the originating focus to provide three windows onto the transformation of and internal contradictions within the Iranian state and the changes in Iranian society. Each case study offered a different account of the interests bound up in gender segregated spaces – interests both in civil society and in the state that transcend gender. This research was important because it demonstrated that what are considered “women’s issues” could come to be taken up by a diverse set of organized interests as an instrument to settle/generate political conflicts. The politics of contradictions and frictions among those who speak for “women” plays out in the intensification of contests over the content of women’s rights.

Scholars of Iranian studies often demonize the Iranian state by romanticizing Iranian civil society- and they often do so by dismissing those observations that do not fit into their accounts. Such conceptions obscure the role of struggles, negotiations, and bargaining that happens both within the state and in between the state and the society. When it comes to accounting for the changes in women’s status under the Islamic Republic, these scholars either dismiss or downplay the role of the Iranian state and its role in the ways in which things have unfolded in the last three decades, or present the state as a fixed and monolithic category which is either reduced to its Islamic dimension represented by the clergy (“the mullahs”), or circumscribed to the government.

The case studies of this research, each, offered conflicting images, not only of the Iranian state and its movement from prohibitive to productive interventions, but also of the relation between the state and society. While the first case, the opening of women-only parks, was about the changing urban environment, new claustrophobic dwellings on the one side and health issues on the other, the second case of the buses, was about the expansion of education and labor market opportunities for women and how these in turn shifted the meanings associated with gender-segregated spaces. The third case, the failed project of women’s access to soccer stadium, was more centrally about the political field, both national and international, and the interests it organizes.

The study of politics of urban segregation and the expansion of gender segregated spaces in Iran reminds us that in order to understand spatial forms one has to move beyond urban planning as an objective science and gender segregation as an ideological practice. This research project explained the extent to which aspects of state practice define and mediate the place of Islam itself. In other words, Islam in this project is not treated as a fixed predetermined category. It is rather defined as a category whose articulation depends on the articulation of state’s other discourses and interests. The boundaries between “Islamic”/ “non-Islamic” are treated as fluid, and I contend that the policy outcomes could vary depending on the variations between power relations (that also determines where the line between Islamic and non-Islamic is drawn). Therefore, the importance of this research is in that it shows that although the Iranian state self-identifies itself an Islamic state, its “stateness” is not subjugated to its “Islamic” dimension.

This research shed light on the workings on an Islamic state in both an Islamists and, what Asef Bayat has referred to as, a Post-Islamist context. With the rise of Islamic states after the Arab Spring and the growing concerns about their treatment of women, this research gains particular importance in that it shows that the reduction of state policies to a crude Islamism is

misleading and directs our attention to a constellation of different factors that should be taken into account while studies any state's relationship to its women.

The Iranian case reveals that to understand spatial transformations one has to look at both the political field, the dynamics of the interests at different geographic scales, and the discursive field, the discourses that are mobilized to justify segregation. Besides, as indicated in this research, segregation does not always aim at or lead to exclusion. The role that gender segregated spaces played for Iranian women was contingent. Thus, any study that attempts to reveal the politics of urban segregation must first and foremost situate those spaces within the socio-political context within which they are embedded.

It is tempting to picture the gender-segregated Tehran as a unique and atypical case from which comparisons to others places cannot be drawn. Nevertheless, the recent surge of gender segregation practices in urban contexts as diverse as Mexico, India, Japan, Guatemala, and even Canada and the UK points to a global process of sexing the city through the continued compartmentalization of urban life. In Iran, *Women's Taxis* have been launched to facilitate women's movements across the city. In Mexico women-only *Pink Taxis* have been introduced to curb sexual harassment. In the UK, *Mum's Taxis* give women the choice of a female driver at night and help mothers with school drop-offs. In Canada entrepreneurs are toying with the idea of establishing women-only taxis in order to cater to the growing Muslim community as their 'target market'. In Israel in ultra-orthodox neighborhoods, in order to sacralize the bus space, the religious authorities have forced the municipality to segregate the bus space along the gender lines, sending women to the back of the buses. There are women-only parking spaces in Korean streets, Ukrainian malls and some German garages.

While gender segregated spaces are widespread, there is no systematic study of these spaces in particular contexts or across various national and cultural settings. Thus, a comparative study of gendered systems of urban mobility appears to be important. Such study highlights how the politics of gender segregation are always related to some of the most fundamental questions facing urban governmentality. Studying the different logics that lead to the launching of women-only spaces across different sites and in various cities helps understand the interconnectedness of micro-level practices and the macro-level structures and processes. To follow these connections in different places and to compare them, we need to keep in mind that the politics of urban segregation always plays out on multiple sites and scales at once. Future research should help us get a clearer picture of the connections between different cities' experiences with gender segregation and their similarities and differences. Such project calls for an investigation of the ways in which both the modern state and the market invest on women as vulnerable subjects and on the "logic of masculinist protection" (Young 2003; see also Brown 1992).

All this challenges the idea of modern city as a homogeneous all inclusive public space. Thus, gender segregation and the creation of women-only spaces appear to be a response to the failure of modern urban spaces. My hope is that the comparative study of urban gender segregation will shed new light on debates about the relation between women and modern urban settings.



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