Women Creating New Spaces: Reconfiguring Gender Segregation in Iran

by

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Abstract

This thesis studies two new gender-segregated places in Iran: women-only parks and women-only metro train cars. There are two dominant and opposing popular narratives of gender segregation in Iran. For conservative Iranian women, gender segregation is central to upholding Islamic values and has offered women access to a "safe" public sphere in certain contexts as an alternative to women's seclusion. More liberal Iranian women, however, see gender segregation as a discriminatory practice that authorities use to subjugate and control women. Liberals tend to describe it in purely negative terms as a sign of an oppressive and restrictive patriarchal order.

Moving beyond these dichotomous understandings, my research mainly focuses on women as actors in gender-segregated spaces enabling them to move beyond the ideologies that have helped establish these segregated spaces and also to make their own spaces with new sets of rules and new ways to relate to their surroundings. In my two-month ethnographic fieldwork in the cities of Zanjan and Tehran, in Iran, I conducted 42 semi-structured open-ended interviews with women who attended women-only park in Zanjan and women peddlers in Tehran metro trains. I have focused on familiarizing myself with the new realties, new categories of spaces, and new categories of being a woman, independently of these practices' and realizations' implications for political/feminist objectives.

This project has aimed to complicate the analysis regarding Iranian women's own understanding and motivations in their use of these spaces. This thesis shows how women, each with a unique lived experience and different sets of struggles and hopes, make use of

these places and how, in doing so, they enhance their meaningful connections to the larger world, material or immaterial, physical or metaphysical.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Samira Torabi. The research project of which this thesis is a part received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Women Creating New Spaces: Reconfiguring Gender Segregation in Iran” No. Pro00072991, 2017-06-07.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Research rationale

> "Places, in short, are delineated by movement, not by the outer limits to movement. Indeed it is for just this reason that I have chosen to refer to people who frequent places as 'inhabitants' rather than 'locals'. For it would be quite wrong to suppose that such people are confined within a particular place, or that their experience is circumscribed by the restricted horizons of a life lived only there."
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> Tim Ingold, From *Being alive,* (2011)

These words are the summary of the type of insight I was trying to cultivate to approach my fieldwork and to narrate my experience. Many studies of gender-segregated spaces are focused on the specifics of these places, restrictions, and limitations as if somehow a particular form of living is confined within those walls which cannot escape, rather than focusing on the experiences and the ways in which women relate to the complexities of their lives, which outlive their time within those places.

In my thesis I have studied two relatively new gender-segregated places in Iran. More specifically I have looked at Zanjan's women-only park and Tehran's women-only section of metro train cars. Studying gender in Iran has become a very sensitive topic because of the politicized and polarized mainstream discourse around it:

Iranian women became the first target of both top-down modernization project in the Pahlavi era (1925-79) and Islamization project of post-revolution Islamic Republic of Iran (since 1979). After the Iranian revolution in 1979 in order to consolidate and establish the new Islamic order distinct from Pahlavi and Western values, the Islamic Republic reinforced its gender ideologies and roles through compulsory veiling and gender segregation in public sphere. Ever

since that time, Islam, Muslim women, and gendered spaces and their politics became the center of some scholarly focus in Iran. Among more secular observers, gender segregation in Iran has been widely considered as a misogynist policy/tradition and a violation of human rights which discriminates against women and halts their participation in their full social/economic potentials. Whatever the merits of such views, they give little thought to women's own views and purposes and the realities of their everyday struggles.

There are two dominant and opposing popular narratives of gender segregation in Iran. For conservative Iranian women, gender segregation is central to upholding Islamic values and has offered women access to a "safe" public sphere in certain contexts as an alternative to women's seclusion. Segregation has contributed to increasing the number of educated women, as many families would refuse to send their young girls to mixed schools, and many adult women would choose not to study alongside men for higher education. (Unlike schools, universities are not gender-segregated in Iran but there are very few women-only universities, and some majors at some universities are gender specific.) More liberal Iranian women, however, see gender segregation as a discriminatory practice that authorities use to subjugate and control women. Liberals tend to describe it in purely negative terms as a sign of an oppressive and restrictive order.

My research departs from these narratives that have focused on either misogynist and restrictive or enabling and empowering aspects of women-only spaces. I have argued for both cases in my discussions. Some analyses of gender segregated spaces (i.e. Hegland [2003], Mohammadi [2019]) have focused on the impact of similarly segregated spaces on women

rights movements and their relation to feminist objectives. Although I find that these studies shoehorn the stories into researchers' politically progressive narratives and categories, I believe these studies have provided valuable narratives that help us study these spaces in ways that go beyond their authors' intent.

Several academic scholars have attempted to go beyond such polarized views of gender-segregated spaces. These scholars have provided subtle perspectives regarding productive aspects of veiling and gender segregation (for example, Abu-Lughod [1993], Mahmood [2005], Papanek [1982]). Leila Abu-Lughod suggests: "we should view the separation of men and women in Muslim society as division into two separate worlds where men and women can live and act in 'parallel' but distinct social realm with their own rules, opportunities and hierarchies. Women's space centers on the lively, bustling and political domestic domain" (Abu-Lughod ,198 5). In line with Abu-Lughod I argue women-only places cannot be understood as places tailored by men for women, with fixed rules and functions.

In this way, I depart significantly from the other major academic study of Iranian women-only parks in Iran, *Public Urban Space, Gender and Segregation: Women-only Urban Parks in Iran*, by Reza Arjmand. That book provides an extensive and useful discussion of the establishment and history of urban parks and gender-segregated urban spaces in Iran. A male sociologist based in Sweden, Arjmand relied on female assistance to conduct his fieldwork in women-only parks in Iran in 2014. His book is primarily a historical and theoretical account of urban spaces and gender segregation in terms of physical, functional, and social dimensions of public urban spaces and gender segregated spaces. However, he has also devoted a chapter to

women's own perception of women-only parks, presented in dichotomous categories of opponents and proponents. In his concluding remarks drawing on Mbembe (2003) and Hansen (2008), Arjmand compares the establishment of women-only parks to the colonial project, presenting it as an attempt to control social space and to produce boundaries and hierarchy. Although I acknowledge that the establishment of women-only parks depended on convincing authorities that they conformed to ruling patriarchal norms, my research completely departs from evaluating women-only parks either as a static continuation of the patriarchal social order or as a form of resistance to patriarchy. Rather, I describe multiple kinds of arguments for and uses of women-only parks. To a large extent, I argue, the establishment of women-only parks succeeded not because the theocratic establishment saw them as a way to extend its gender ideology but, to the contrary, because the establishment could not argue against the justifications for the parks. That is, women-only parks exist largely in spite of the wishes of the theocratic establishment.

Moving beyond binary understanding of women-only parks, or evaluating these spaces in their relation to 'the' patriarchy (a place where patriarchy is either conformed or resisted) my research mainly focuses on women as actors in gender-segregated spaces enabling them to move beyond the ideologies that have helped establish these segregated spaces and also to make their own spaces with new set of rules, and new ways to relate to their surroundings. More importantly, I have focused on familiarizing myself with the new realties, modification of *urf*, and new categories of being a woman, independently of these practices' and realizations' implications for political/feminist objectives.

Focusing on everyday life practices

I witnessed how both secularist and Islamist women creatively used such spaces to make new virtual and physical spaces to address their social, religious, and financial needs. For example, the gender-segregated train-cars have created unconventional labor markets and financial opportunities for women that are absent in non-segregated spaces. Women of opposing political, religious, and class orientations, who normally would not meet, find themselves conversing or engaged in a shared activity. In Iran's politically polarized atmosphere, women-only public spaces provide women from different social backgrounds a unique opportunity to interact with one another and participate in group activities.

In her study of Sudanese women and Islamization, Salma Ahmed Nageeb (2004) emphasizes the necessity of focusing on everyday life practices to study their social space: "studying women's construction of social space from a gendered perspective necessitates focusing on women's everyday lives and practices." Such ethnographic accounts enable us to move beyond binary observation and prefixed categories.

During my fieldwork I encountered unexpected or significant observations and responses. For example, to my surprise a large number of women were still covering their hair in the women-only park, even though one primary justification for building these parks was to allow women to remove their headscarves to get exposure to the sun. I was also surprised when some women, asked to contrast their experience in mixed parks to their experience in the women-only park, compared being in non-segregated parks to being "in prison." I found this analogy ironic, as women-only parks were the ones with tall walls and a gate. I also found it

interesting to see how many women peddlers in women-only train cars justify their officially "illegal" job on religious grounds, referring to their work as "halal" (permissible).

Bourdieu (1990) argues that previous experience of the space serves as a ground for reproduction of social practices shaped by habitus, a process he refers to as "structuring structure." In line with Bourdieu I argue that these new women's spaces, which are not associated with previous experiences, may open up new possibilities and realizations, which they will collectively continue to reproduce. In line with Foucault's (1977) theory that the power that constrains is also a power that enables and produces, I ask, what kinds of subjectivity and social action are enabled in such women-only spaces? How do women make social connections that would be impossible elsewhere? What economic opportunities become available for women as a result of this?

Politics of my fieldwork

The kind of activities I did as a researcher and also my methodology (proposed questions, recording, etc.) were limited by the political environment of the fieldwork that I conducted my ethnographic research in. In very recent years two anthropologists (Homa Hoodfar and Fariba Adelkhah) were arrested in Iran during their fieldwork[1]. From the point of view of authorities,

[1] Homa Hoodfar is an Anthropology professor at Concordia university. She was arrested in June 2016 in Iran during her fieldwork. She was detained for 112 days in Evin prison. She works on sexuality and gender.
Fariba Adelkhah is an Anthropologist and researcher at Sciences Po university in Paris. Her research is on modernity and Iran. She was detained in June 2019 while she was conducting her research in Qom, Iran. She is still in prison.

"research" in social science is inherently suspicious, especially research about gender and women, and even more particularly research conducted by Iranians with dual citizenships living abroad. In order to observe everyday activities without drawing undue attention to myself, I participated in daily activities such as doing exercises, biking, and walking in women-only parks and activities such as commuting and shopping in metro trains.

I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews during my two-months of fieldwork, in order organizing them around a set of common questions explored by most interviewees yet leaving opportunities for my interviewees to discuss their own concerns. My questions mainly explored two areas: 1) Women's own narratives of their everyday life and activities in women-only spaces, 2) Their views regarding gender segregated spaces. As a more accurate, convenient, and secure way of recording, I audio-recorded my interviews using my cellular phone. To avoid raising attention or concerns, I mostly took mental (but detailed) notes during my fieldwork. I carefully observed women's activities, the way they dressed, the most/least populated time of the day in each of the two spaces, etc. I would write my observations as soon as I left the space and had access to internet to simultaneously upload my field notes in cloud space, leaving no trace of my notes locally on my laptop.

Given the level of sensitivity regarding studying gender in Iran, I chose my topic with a great deal of consideration to minimize the potential risks for myself and my informants and interviewees. On several occasions my interviewees expressed their anti-state political views, which if traced back to them might pose a high risk to them. As a result, I had to take all

possible steps to protect my fieldnotes, and I did not make or keep any record of my interviewees' identity.

There were moments when interviewees articulated views that were critical of other women. Those were teaching moments for me, making me aware of my critical stance and at the same time pushing me to genuinely try to understand and acknowledge the multiplicity of views and lived experiences among women. I believe not only that these conflicting views deserve to be heard and acknowledged, but that to shape a better life for Iranian women, an inclusive, in depth analysis of the range of existing views is a necessity. Mirhossein Mousavi, one of two leaders of the Green movement in Iran, a resistance movement that questioned the legitimacy of Ahmadinezhad's re-election in 2009, once said: "Our victory is when everyone wins." He has been under house arrest for the past 8 years.

Why study that, but not this?

One of the challenging and sometimes discomforting experiences I had regarding my research was when I was trying to talk about my research to some of my Iranian acquaintances in Canada, a high proportion of whom are secular and vehemently opposed to the Iranian state. Without waiting to hear the whole story, with the first few words out of my mouth they would interrupt and ask: "how dare you legitimize Islamic Republic's backward actions?."

I read these responses in the post-revolution political context of Iran, which has polarized discourses around hijab, religion, etc. The polarized discourses, however, do not reflect the heterogeneity of voices and oppositions. In addition to religious Shīʿa Muslims who support the Islamic Republic, there is a diverse opposition composed of other more or less

religious Shīʿa, secular liberals, Marxists, and Sunnis. Islamists took over power but never gained "hegemony" over large parts of the more secular or religious yet not Islamist population. Axworthy summarizes the situation as follows:

> The revolution was not successful because all Iranians thought the same way, but because for a brief time a large majority, despite differences between the social and ideological groups to which they belonged, came together, accepting the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, to demand an end to the monarchy. It is important to grasp this, because after 1979 those groups diverged, and have had their own partisan views of the revolution. (Axworthy, 2019)

As an anti-state demonstration, many attempted to distance themselves from the Islamic discourse (as a unified body of beliefs) which in their view legitimized the "tyranny" of the regime. Furthermore anti-Arab sentiment heightened. To many Iranians, the Arabs who invaded "Great Persia" more than a thousand years ago invaded their "glorious" way of living. Many of them now emphasize Aryan ethnic identity, pre-Islamic history, and Zoroastrianism in contrast to Islamic identity. For instance, in a friendly soccer match between Iran and Germany, a large number of Iranian spectators at Azadi stadium gave Nazi salutes to German players. The incident probably had nothing to do with anti-Semitism but it was a failed attempt by Iranians to emphasize their shared Aryan ethnic identity with Germans. In this polarized atmosphere I find it necessary to elaborate on why I have not focused on repressive aspects of gender-segregation in Iran.

Firstly, Iran is the country where I was born and lived for most of my life, and I am familiar with its social complexities more than those of any other country. At the same time, as a result of living in Canada for the past eight years, I have tried to distance myself from many of my biases and unquestioned assumptions. These two factors privileged me with a unique scholarly opportunity to choose Iran as my fieldwork. In so doing, I had to be careful about the ways I defined and framed my project in order not to undermine the safety of my interviewees and even to be able to conduct and finalize my project.

Secondly, the Islamic Republic of Iran's repressive and restrictive powers have been the center of scholarly and non-academic discussions and analyses. Shahrokhi (2014) warns against overstating Iran's repressive power that has left exploring Iranian state's productive power mostly untouched. She contends: "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."

Thirdly, in the past few years with US exiting the nuclear deal and re-imposing and imposing sanctions (including medicine) against Iran, many Iranians are struggling to make ends meet. Due to these sanctions, many companies were closed, and many lost their jobs. The deal was proceeded and negotiated by reformists in Iran and Trump's exit weakened their (reformist and moderate party) base further and strengthened hardliners. On the other side of the story, an Iranian women's anti-hijab campaign called "My Stealthy Freedom[2]," led by a US-based

[2] Fox News: "Facebook posts show Iranian women tossing hijabs, praising freedom." https://www.foxnews.com/world/facebook-posts-show-iranian-women-tossing-hijabs-praising-freedom.

Iranian former journalist, has been used to legitimize sanctions and possibly military action against Iran. The campaign is portrayed by mainstream media, and at times by academics, as one story: "oppressed women challenging the Islamic law of hijab." In this portrayal this campaign is a campaign against 'oppressing tool' of hijab, and the Muslim women who are participating are assumed to be more "liberal minded." The Iranian government also called participants "cultural criminals" as if they were a few brain-washed youths being misguided by the West. This binary rhetoric reinforced polarized discussion surrounding hijab in Iran. A few months ago, the campaign's leader Masih Alinejad met with United States secretary of state Michael Pompeo to "give voice to the voiceless (Iranian women)." This movement's approach and its advocacy for war and sanctions against Iranians is pink-washing and marginalizing the violence of sanctions on ordinary Iranians behind the goals of "women rights" and "human-rights." I am doubtful to the achievements of this campaign when the means to fighting against compulsory hijab is posing sanctions and war mongering, without actually discussing the impact of war or sanctions on Iranian women. I chose to do a research project that fulfills my academic curiosity and my academic goal to contribute to the field, and also to live up to my personal yet informed ethical values and to enhance my connection to the world I am living in.

The Telegraph: "'Pure freedom': The Iranian women without hijabs on Facebook." https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10827077/Pure-freedom-The-Iranian-women-without-hijabs-on-Facebook-pictures.html. Economist: "Though many Iranian women stay covered even at home in the presence of male relatives, millions of more liberal-minded ones fling off their veils as soon as they step inside." https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/06/14/get-it-off-put-i

This research's promises

This project has aimed to complicate the analysis regarding Iranian women's own understanding and motivations in their use of these spaces. In each chapter I have tried to highlight different aspects of women-only spaces through which women have asserted themselves and have formed new responses and new categories of responses to these spaces.

In chapter 2, I introduce my fieldwork and incorporate some historical accounts of gender segregation in Iran, which is important not only in providing some context, but also in helping to demonstrate the multiplicity of discourses around the establishment of these spaces as opposed to popular belief being purely driven by the state's patriarchal power.

Studying women in social context inevitably brings the notion of agency to the discussion. In Chapter 3, I explore and reflect on agency, first by discussing existing scholarly approaches to Muslim women's agency, and then by clarifying my own position on this question. This chapter serves as a base ground to demonstrate multiplicity of views in representing Muslim women's participation in social life and also their complex understanding and ways of relating to these spaces. In chapter 4, I have focused on different, sometimes contradictory possibilities and outcomes of women's active presence in women-only spaces. Communities and new networks are formed, and within them there are the possibilities of inhabiting and reproducing norms and also the possibility to de-destabilize them. In chapter 5 I have discussed the formation of an underground market with new characteristics in the women's cars of the Tehran metro train. I have also challenged my own identity as conducting native anthology and how it has affected my analysis and approach.

The last chapter serves as a conclusion to bring this research all together but in a more unconventional way. Rather than trying to summarize what I have done in a new set of wording, I have tried to discuss how all of this can relate to new questions. My intention is to provoke questions rather than to propose answers, thus leaving my research, my reader, and myself with set of analytical questions. In doing so I bring up some new topics and analysis. Since “having fun” is the most common keyword that women use to describe their experience in women-only parks, I draw on politics of fun in the context of Iran. I ask: can having fun be understood as an end itself in no need of analysis? I’ve also made a comparison between two women-only spaces in two radically different contexts: the women-only park in Zanjan and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which had an explicitly radical feminist orientation. I will also point to how these new realities discussed in this research formed in segregated spaces, furthermore complicate “the problem of women” for the state. Finally, by using the word “Storyshop” as in the Adobe software “Photoshop” I have tackled recent approaches to storytelling in a neoliberal context.

Chapter 2. All-women versus Gender-segregated

Going to fieldwork

It was a week since I arrived in Zanjan, Iran. I had checked the open hours for the only women-only park in Zanjan on Google a day before I had decided to go to the park. I decided to go by public transit to find my way around the city and also to get to know the experience of women who are using public transportation system. I walked all the way to downtown to get on a van which passes by the women-only park. I passed by the colorful grocery stores displaying seasonal fresh fruit and the people inside the stores shopping. I found the van and it turned out that I was the last one to seat, so I did not have to wait for it to fill up. Given what I had heard about the popularity of these parks, I was surprised to be the only one to get off the van near a footbridge that crosses the highway to the women-only park.

It was early May, and the weather was already a sunny 23 degrees. There was only one women-only park in Zanjan, my home town during my visit. A new one has been opened in 2019. Surrounded by mountains, Zanjan is located in northwest of Iran. Close to the borders of Azerbaijan and Turkey, Zanjan is a bilingual city although Farsi (Persian) is the only official language in Iran. A majority of the older generation residents of Zanjan speak Azerbaijani as their first language, many of whom have difficulty speaking fluent Farsi. These people are usually from families in which their parents did not speak Farsi at home so despite their possible knowledge in Farsi they are most comfortable speaking Azerbaijani. And/or they don't have formal education, hence they haven't learnt Farsi at school. With population of almost

half a million, it is considered a small to medium-sized city and is also considered somewhat conservative.

Having been in Iran for just over a week, I was back to my old habit of checking if no other "suspicious-looking" man was stepping on the foot bridge from either side or was even already on the bridge. Their narrowness and limited visibility from the public make foot bridges an opportune place for harassers and predators. The very feeling of insecurity to cross a bridge and taking precautionary steps made me rethink the questions I had had since starting this project: what measures is the government taking to make public spaces safe places for Iranian women? How genuine is the argument of women's well-being for establishing gender-segregated places? Which group of women's well-being? And what is their well-being? Is there a sense of well-being that all Iranian women can agree on? Can these women-only public places normalize women's sexual harassment in non-segregated public places?

As I approached the gate of the women-only park, I realized that it was closed. The see-through iron gate was wide enough for two cars to pass through side-by-side, and the only visible area beyond the gate was the parking lot. The walls were not as tall as I had expected, just a little higher than ordinary walls and not impossible to climb over. I called my cousin who is a frequent visitor to the women-only park and double-checked the hours with her. She confirmed that the park was closed at that time of the day and that Google had gotten it wrong. The experience reminded me of the credibility and importance of personal/social contacts in Iran.

History of gender segregation in Iran

Contrary to popular belief, gender-segregated spaces in Iran were not first introduced by the Islamic Republic of Iran or Islam, although they were institutionalized and reinforced by law after the Islamic revolution. The division of residential space to *andaruni* (interior) and *birooni* (exterior) in Iranian's traditional housing architecture is an example of strict observation of women's designated area. This design had been traditionally institutionalized and informally practiced for centuries. These architectural distinctions allocating women to *andaruni* and men to *birooni* were based on general gender role divisions prevalent in many times and places in and beyond the Muslim world. Describing a village in Sudan, Janice Boddy similarly notes that men were associated with outside world, while women, "who are identified with the inside, are not only protected but also dependent" (Boddy, 1989). The separation of these two worlds is centered around a certain logic informed by several things—women's bodies (especially reproductive parts) are more inward oriented, women are to be protected and thus "wrapped" (veiling), men are often assumed to be more properly connected to "outer" things affecting the whole community (Hill, 2018).

In many cases, as opposed to creating a women-only space, men and women used the same space but separately in turns. Abedi and Fischer (2006) describe one of the cases in a contemporary Iranian village where "the bathhouse was used both for cleanliness and ritual purity. Menfolk used it before dawn, womenfolk afterwards."

Historically, gender segregation dates back to pre-Islamic era. It was during the Sassanid Empire (224– 651 CE) that the gender-distinctive urban culture in Iran first started rising. This

was when the environment reinforced sexual differences, inserted assumptions about gender and embodied gender identities (Arjmand [2017], Rizvi [2000], Karimi [2003]). Despite the energetic and vigorous participation of educated and socially active women linked to the royal family and elite classes in social and public spaces, during the Safavid and later the Qajar dynasties, women were excluded from public spaces and women's presence and mobility in public spaces were limited and prohibited (Arjmand, 2017). Karimi (2003: 28) makes the case that the seclusion during the Qajar era was often regarded as a sign of honor and respect, which was tighter in wealthy neighborhoods where houses were surrounded by tall walls with no window opening to the streets.

The Pahlavis (1925– 1979), however, promoted a Western lifestyle with the ambition of modernizing Iran, which led to the introduction of gender-neutral public spaces in the country. Reza Shah in 1936, banned wearing hijab in public. According to Hoodfar (2001) the rhetoric of de-veiling claimed to liberate women so they could contribute to building a new modern nation. Although state-compelled unveiling became part of modernization process in Iran and it was implied that to be modern, the person needed to be unveiled, religious factions in the society displayed a conscious resistance against the Pahlavis' policies on this issue. The female body and the issue of veiling or unveiling became the topic for debates and struggle in social and public arenas in Iran. The Pahlavis' efforts contributed greatly to the visibility of women from certain social backgrounds (Arjmand,2017), more specifically upper middle class and educated women in the public and social spaces in modern Iran, and at the same time it restricted and made it more difficult for women from working class, and/or from more

traditional families–which constituted the majority of the women at the time–to appear in public (Hoodfar, 2001).

During the Revolution of 1979, many protesters adopted veiling to distinguish their post-revolutionary "utopia" from Western values. Soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, all women were forced by law to wear hijab in public. These two top-down political events regarding veiling on one hand, and a globalization trend with the introduction of internet and its applications in Iran on the other hand, have changed and created new and diverse meanings to veiling in Iran. These meanings and complexities are not being communicated to Western audiences. Through colonialism and post colonialism history, Muslim women have had to carry on with forced and sometimes idealized or minimalized identity both in their national communities and also internationally (Hoodfar, 2001).

As discussed, the gendered spaces established after the Islamic Revolution in Iran have never been a foreign concept in Iranian traditional urban design and architecture. In many public (or even private) spaces, as a result of the influence of either vernacular religion or tradition, separate spaces were designated for women and men. However, the Islamic republic of Iran's enforcement of hijab and gender segregation was giving a new political meaning to this struggle. Eventually the process of sexual segregation in public spaces which was first implemented in public beaches, extended to other segments, and sometimes private spaces of the society.

Examples of this extension mainly include segregation in public transportation systems, schools and sport clubs. This practice met resistance from various groups: secular groups, who

were against compulsory veiling; certain religious groups, who made the case for the voluntary nature of religious belief and practices according to the Quran.

Women-only park: A first impression

It was almost 5 pm on a sunny, warm day with an occasional cool breeze. While taking the exact same path I had taken the first time to visit my fieldwork site, I was thinking of the reasons why I had never visited this park before moving to Canada. First of all, it was not as popular as it is today, so I was never invited to family's and friends' parties or get-togethers there. In fact, I had only heard about the park on very few occasions. Moreover, I didn't have any restrictions from my family regarding going to cafés and restaurants with my friends. Also, I was a member of a mountain-climbing club at the university, and my weekend mountain-climbing trips probably gave me my fill of nature. Or maybe these are not good enough reasons not to try out the new women-only park in my city at least once to see how it looks and satisfy my curiosity. On the other hand, experiencing gender segregation since I was 7 years old going to school until I graduated from high school, I thought I had had enough of women-only spaces. To be honest, I had not given so much thought to it at the time for the reasons mentioned, but if someone had asked, I would have expressed the assumption that women-only parks attract conservative women who do the same things they might anywhere else regardless of any tall walls separating them from the rest of the society.

Unlike the first time, three other women stepped out of the van, and I was sure they were going to the park, not just because the only other place to visit out here in the outskirts was an industrial town socially exclusive to men, but also from their casual and colorful dress.

Also, two of them together were carrying a basket full of snacks. We crossed the footbridge, and I saw a flow of women walking towards the park, being dropped off by cars or driving right to the gate. One man in a security uniform was standing to the right of the gate near their booth calmly observing and sometimes guiding women drivers. He seemed relaxed, as if he was doing a routine and boring job where nothing was ever going to happen. His job was mainly to protect the gate from any unwanted entrance. There was a sign prohibiting the entrance of boys above the age 7. As I saw women entering the park holding their sons' hands who seemed to be about the age of 7, who were not stopped for ID verification, I assumed it is not as strict as the sign suggested.

As I passed through the gate, I saw another man in uniform sitting on a bench just behind the booth drinking tea. The gateway leads straight to parking spot where a woman in uniform, not the most conservative one, was selling parking passes to drivers. I was expecting another gate or door to the main area but the only thing to reduce the visibility is the location of parking area and greenery. Instead of going straight in the path that leads to parking area, I turned left following the crowd. No cars are allowed beyond the parking area.

My first observation was the sound of laughter and chatting from children playing and bicycles passing by me. The women-only park is part of an older Park in Zanjan, so there are some tall and old trees. The most famous one is Robinia with their last white blossoms for early May on both sides of the road. We used to put its blossoms' stamen under our tongue before final exams for good luck and protection as its shape resembled the first word of nearly every Sura in Qur'an, "Besm," meaning "In the name (of God)."

There was a wide side walk on the left side of the road and a group of women ranging from 2 to 25 were sitting on light carpets they brought with themselves chatting and sharing food and listening to music. After a short walk the street was divided into two roads. The one on my left was wider and there were a dozen pieces of workout equipment and fitness machines, followed by willow trees on the sidewalk. Most of the pieces of equipment were taken. After the workout equipment, there was a ping-pong table, where two women were playing as three or four others watched them play. The road led to a wider area with a washroom on my left. Another road was on the right side and there was another narrower road just across the area. I followed the wider road, where there were benches with high tables to play chess in the shade. Among the trees and bushes were also several two-foot high cement platforms that women had covered with their own soft carpets to sit on.

Many women were walking and jogging alongside me at various paces, mostly in groups. Some women ran alone wearing handsfree headsets. From time to time, a woman riding a bicycle would pass by. Children also chased after each other. Some women were clapping to the rhythm of a song one of them was singing. The road then led to a large but empty blue pool. At the poolside was a small café. I went inside and found that their menu offered steeped tea, instant coffee, ice cream, and cookies. Although I love Persian style black tea, I treated myself to an ice cream in such warm weather. There was a wide grass area with a gentle slope outside the cafe which led to a number of steps to form a theatre area in the lowest ground. Many women were sitting on the steps or the grass area. I followed a high beat song and there

was a group of around eight dressed-up women in their early twenties holding gifts and gift bags. I assumed it was a birthday party. A little further ahead I noticed two schoolgirls studying.

I followed one of the roads that led between the trees and instantly the sound of children playing became louder and dominant. I thought there must be a playground very close by, but I couldn't see the other side of the road as it was covered with trees and long bushes. After almost four minutes of walking around a circular road I reached to the source of the sounds I was hearing. There was a large playground where children played under the supervision of their mothers or other relatives. I followed the road beyond the playground to the narrow road I had spotted in the wide area where the washrooms were located. I liked this narrow road; the tall trees on both sides were tall so you could only see some bright blue spots amongst them if you looked up. The trees on the sides of this road are popular with crows, who had built many nests on them and sat chattering on the branches. It took me two hours to walk around the park. It is estimated that on average 1500 women visit this park daily, and on special occasions the number rises to 5000. As I was heading out, two things stuck with me about this place: the green, and the sound of having fun.

Establishment of women-only parks

Zanjan's women-only park is among many of these parks in Iran, as I am writing these lines, the second women-only park in Zanjan was opened recently. Many more are expanding across the country, many are under construction, and some new projects have been approved all around Iran which makes the total number close to 100 parks nation-wide.

When the first women-only parks were approved and built, many Iranians as well as Western observers assumed that it is the continuation of gender segregation of Islamic republic suggested by Islamists and hardliners for ideologically conservative purposes. However, the idea was first introduced by the deputy of women and family affairs and was rejected in the 1990s. The idea resurfaced once again after the release of medical data by President Khatami's reformist government's ministry of health, which raised concerns regarding health problems among younger women stemming from a serious vitamin D deficiency. Mandatory Hijab and Islamists' preferred life style on one hand and the introduction of modern apartment housing with no private yards on the other, were explicit and implicit contributing factors to women's vitamin D deficiency.

The establishment of these parks was criticized by many hardliners. In March 2019, in a Friday prayer in city of Kashmar, the imam expressed discontent regarding one women singing in an event at a women-only park, stating although even if everyone is a woman, these actions are not Islamic regardless, and we should fear if they become the norm.

In April 2019, Keyhan news, the right-wing newspaper that is most strongly aligned with the Supreme leader, reported on the endangerment of Islamic moral values stemming from listening to western music and dancing in women-only parks.

Although reports regarding vitamin D deficiency at alarming rate among Iranian women were the starting point for the idea of women-only parks (Mahdavifar 2005, Arjmand 2017), the idea of these parks was only entertained because it was in line with the state's broader gender

ideology. On the other hand, this can be understood as a response to popularization of Western values and Western life-style, known as “cultural invasion” (Shahrokni, 2014).

Responses to women-only parks

The responses I received regarding women-only parks were limited to the women who visited this park in Zanjan. I was more interested in finding out the usage of these spaces by women who were attending the park, rather than the reception of the park by Iranian women in general. Almost all my interviewees stated that the establishment of this park has increased the time they spent outdoors in green spaces, indicating that visiting this park is not replacing their other outdoor activities but adding to the overall time they spend in a public green space. Most noted reasons in my interviews for women to like this park were, but not limited to:

- They felt more comfortable in the absence of men. For most of the women I talked to it was not that they were banned from walking, running or using fitness machines in regular parks, or that they didn’t think it was appropriate for women to run or work-out, but they simply didn’t feel comfortable to do so in the presence of men. Nasrin described her experience in other parks as being in prison: “I have to constantly check my hijab. I have to check if a man is looking. I can’t sit, walk, talk, and laugh the way I do here. It is like I’m in a prison in other parks. But it is different in here.”

- The kind of activities that are not available to them in other parks are available in this park. Some activities like playing a musical instrument, dancing, laughing out loud are frowned upon in public spaces regardless of the gender of the person doing them, but more restrictions are in place for women engaging in these activities.

- A better alternative to an in-house gathering. Visiting close relatives on a regular basis is customary in Iran. In recent years and with more people living in smaller apartments and the increasing costs of having parties and get-togethers, it has been difficult to maintain this custom. This park has provided women with the opportunity to keep their tradition with more space and less cost. Usually everyone brings some food to share, rather than one person being responsible for the food.

- Children cannot get lost, as the park is walled. This park is very popular among mothers with young children. In my interviews, mothers with young children frequently stated that they could have some time for themselves here as opposed to other parks where they had to constantly watch over their children.

- Free alternative to gyms. Most women who were running in the park expressed their delight and joy in being able to run in a beautiful green space and to breathe “pure oxygen.”

- They can come here independent of their husband or family accompanying them. Most women noted they usually go to other parks on the last night of the week before the weekend with their families.

- Free alternative to coffee shops. One of the significant observations I had in my visit to Iran was the growing number and popularity of coffee shops. The prices on their menus were almost comparable to the prices of the items in franchised coffee shops in Canada, although the average income in Iran far lower than the average income in Canada. Nassim is 20 years old and studies Computer Science. She and her three friends were photographing with a professional camera on a tripod and they were holding some balloons. She expressed: “when we want to

have an all-girl get-together, here is our number one option, as it is very expensive to go to coffee shops. We also get to have better pictures here, with natural lighting, green space and with the veils off." She told me that her friend's birthday is coming up next week and these photos are for her to post on her Instagram on her birthday.

One of the significant term women used to describe women-only nature of the park was the frequent use of "all-women" versus "gender-segregated" spaces. Tahmineh, in her late 40s, has an associate's degree in Education and works as administrative staff in a middle school for girls. She told me:

> I love this park. I can't even believe we came so far to have an entire park for us, all women, to dance, to run. When I was going to school it was after the revolution and in war-time. I remember we couldn't wear any color other than black or dark navy blue to school. One time they searched our bags at school and they found a picture of my brother, who was a soldier fighting in the Iran-Iraq war, in my purse. I was removed from the class and they called my mother. I explained to them that he is my brother, but they didn't believe me. I was humiliated in front of my classmates. When my mother confirmed that it was actually my bother in the picture, they told her it's not appropriate for a young girl to have a picture of a boy in her purse because it may give the wrong impression to other students. Later on, I was called lovebird at school as everyone thought I had a boyfriend. I had to change my school the following year. When I started my job in a school, I remembered it all and tried to treat students with the kind of respect they deserved. Hatred begets hatred. Everyone deserves to be happy. Look

around you everyone looks happy here, something I didn't grow up with. This place is our right that was denied for a long time.

When I asked about her brother she sighed deeply and told me he never came back. Finally, she asked me to forward her "sincere gratitude" to the city for the establishment of this park.

"All-women" versus "gender-segregated"

Having fun and joy were among the key terms reoccurring in my interviews when women were describing their experience. Women's experience in women-only parks is radically different than other women-only places such as buses, mosques and schools. In none of my interviews did women used the phrase "gender-segregated" to describe the women-only park. All other segregated places are divided into men's and women's sections, but most public parks are not gender-segregated. Thus, women do not frequent women-only parks because they are excluded from other parks but because they have their own reasons for seeking an all-women space.

Of course, there are many Iranian women with different sets of reasoning who oppose the idea of women-only parks. As my interviews were focused on women who use these spaces, unsurprisingly, I didn't encounter a woman in the women-only park who opposed the idea in general. There were some complaints regarding management, maintenance and general order of the park but not towards its very existence. I also encountered some women outside my fieldwork who were vehemently against these parks. They were largely between the ages of 25 and 35, highly educated, and from the upper middle class of the society, and did not see the

park as providing unique opportunities as others did. They believed these parks would result in increased sexual harassment in regular parks. It is important to note that there is no formal data or even an informal collective concession supporting the increase of sexual harassment since the establishment of these parks. On the other hand, some religious women also oppose the idea, on the grounds that Islam is "endangered" in these parks.

Women largely interpreted this space as being their own, established for their needs, managed and organized by women. And they were well aware of hardliners' discontent with the establishment of these parks. For most women I interviewed, the establishment of women-only parks was regarded as the work of municipality to fulfill their need to have free access to greenery, rather than the state imposing its gender ideology.

Some feminist scholars may interpret women's expression describing their experience as an "imprisonment" in men's presence, or their sense of "pure freedom" in women-only spaces, as an internalized patriarchal value. In the next chapter I have tried to reflect on different analytical approaches to the question of Muslim women's presence in public.

Chapter 3. What it means to them, what it means to us

"From Darkness into Light"; whose darkness, what light?

From Darkness into light: women's emancipation in Iran is the translated title of an Iranian book by female writer, Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad, in 1967. The book was translated in 1977 by F.R.C Bagley. The original title is "زن ایرانی از انقلاب مشروطیت تا انقلاب سفید," which a literal and more accurate translation of which it would be: Iranian woman from constitutional revolution to white revolution. Obviously, the translated title is not even a close translation of the original title. The book explores the lives and activities of a number of significant Iranian women activists during these revolutions. The contemporary Iranian women's movement started with the constitutional movement. For someone unfamiliar with these revolutions, one might wonder what darkness has to do with Constitutional movement and light with White revolution. The Constitutional movement happened between 1905-11 During Qajar dynasty in Iran. It resulted in the establishment of "Constitutional" monarchy and the proclamation of the Iranian Constitution of 1906.

The White revolution was a series of reforms authorized and launched by Mohammadreza Shah during 1962-3. With the primary focus on land ownership reforms, nationalization of forest, formation of literacy and health corps for rural isolated areas and granting voting rights to women. Shah himself suggested the name White Revolution as he considered himself to be achieving important socio-economic reforms with 'no' bloodshed. But in reality, these reforms raised opposition because many people found them to be against their traditional way of life, and some protestors were killed, leading to more series of protests.

These protests and oppositions eventually became greater and more widespread, ultimately leading to the Islamic revolution of 1979. However reading the book in Farsi, one cannot infer if the author has had a negative (darkness) or positive (lightness) view of either of these movements.

The mother of one of my friends has been visiting Edmonton from Iran for the past two months to help with my friend's newborn. A retired teacher, she told me a story about the White revolution at one of our gatherings. When she was a student in Iran, a teacher had asked the students to write an essay about White revolution. She started reading her essay out-loud in class with an opening line: no revolution is a white revolution. She was immediately interrupted and was expelled from school. Can translating the Constitutional movement as 'darkness' or top down secular reforms of the White revolution as 'light' be understood as a result of language barriers or of meanings "lost in translation"? Or is it a deliberate choice of wording, not loyal to the original title, something catchy and more in accord with orientalist understanding of Muslim women?

Depictions of Muslim women either in darkness as docile victims, or resisting against their Muslim male kin (or patriarchal Islam) with their "weapons of the weak" have long existed and are still reproduced in academic studies in literature, the arts, and social sciences.

My research involves study of Iranian women's social life in public places, therefore agency becomes a central part to build my argument. The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the notion of agency and the ways in which it has been conceptualized and applied in the

context of Muslim women. And finally, I aim to provide some clarity regarding my own understanding and approach to agency in my research.

An Oriental Muslim woman

Representing Muslim women living in harems with the sole purpose of fulfilling their Muslim husbands' hyper-sexualized desires has long existed in oriental discourse. Depiction of Muslim women as victims of patriarchal Islam, living a radically different life in tyranny of their husbands and/or their oppressive culture still thrives and is reproduced in literature and academia. Paidar (1995) has summarized the oriental/colonial feminism characterization in three major commonalities. First is its binary division between "us" and "them": while white women are enjoying relative freedom in every aspect of life, their Muslim counterparts are oppressed. Second is the victimization project of Muslim women, victims with internalized oppression who don't even comprehend the extent of their misery or are too weak to resist. In either of these two cases they need saving from their oppressive traditions. Abu-Lughod (2002) points out a great documented example of such perspective in a collection called "Our Moslem sisters," with the subtitle that reads: "A cry of need from the lands of darkness interpreted by those who heard." The third characteristic is reducing the lives of millions of Muslim women to unchanging and predictable stories, ignoring the fact that Muslim women live in diverse geographical locations from North-West of Africa to South East of Asia with radically different economics, politics, and histories. Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) point out to the fact that Muslim women in colonial view can be reduced to either being subordinated or liberated based on one single item of clothing. They ask: "Can our bras, ties, pants, miniskirts, underwear, and

bathing suits all be so easily arrayed on one or the other side of this divide? Can our daily activities and life decisions really be captured and understood within this logic of freedom or captivity?."

The notion of agency

In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslim women's lives became the target of mass media analysis, fiction writing, movie making and etc. It also led to scholarly focus on studying women's agency in Muslim world. With the history of colonialism and orientalism on one hand, and more recent Islamist revivalism movements and forced wars in the region on the other, studying Muslim women's agency was largely shaped through the lens of political claims and agendas. A great body of social science literature emerged with the ambition of granting power and resistance to those who are considered devoid of any (Durham, 2008). In the same vein, Ruth Payne and Lorenzo I. Bordonaro (2012) argued: "Studies dealing with agency across the disciplines of the social sciences have, therefore, focused primarily on categories of actors marked by exclusion, poverty and victimization," with the aim of showing that these people were not merely passive victims.

For many scholars, this became an unchallenged assumption that all women have inherent desire to resist patriarchy, and Muslim women's passivity or indifference toward patriarchal demands has been explained in terms like "internalized patriarchy." For instance, commenting on Shīʿa women's rituals in Pakistan, Mary Elaine Hegland (2003) maintains: "to the extent that they have avoided internalization [of patriarchy], women try to resist patriarchal demands when and if they feel the costs will not be too high."

What puzzled these scholars and analysts was women's active role and participation in Islamist revivalism movements in the Muslim world. These movements emphasized women's modesty, piety, and subordination to God as well as subordination to male authority. According to Saba Mahmood, one of the most common feminist reactions in analyzing women's participation in these movements was to analyze it as false-consciousness. One other major response framed women's participation in terms of fundamental contradiction; asking why women would so actively participate in and promote a movement which undermines 'their own interest'.

In the same vein, some ethnographic accounts such as Hegland's (2003) looked for "good" instances of agency, the ones that promote liberation and progress, and negatively evaluated "bad" ones. Hegland (2003) is upfront in framing her project as a liberal one wanting to see Pakistani women living more free lives. The focus of similar scholarly works is to identify some "redeemable elements" in "non-liberal" movements. Muslim women are praised for asserting the "right" kind of agency, the one consistent with the liberal conception of autonomous self.

While this overall goal can be sympathized with, what is more important is the kind of underlying assumptions, which have lead to this analytical approach to agency. I will try to elaborate on these assumptions and political goals that fuel certain analytical approaches. One of the key terms most used in an attempt to conceptualize agency is resistance. Resistance was not immune from different feminist political projects either. After the longstanding Oriental tradition in depicting Muslim women as docile victims devoid of any agency, a new body of

literature emerged, partly in response to the Oriental tradition, that focused on identifying subtle, day-to-day acts of resistance and celebrating Muslim women's agency. While it was a transformative shift to tie agency to everyday life resistance, as Abu-Lughod (1990) has elaborated in "The Romance of Resistance" we should not interpret any sign of resistance as a proof of the lack of women's subordination or the ineffectiveness of systems of power. Abu-Lughod (1990) emphasizes letting these acts of resistance teach us about complexity of power structures, as these acts of resistance are not located outside fields of power, but are within.

Dichotomy of resistance and subordination

In her book *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood (2005) has critiqued Abu-Lughod by problematizing the use of resistance as an analytical tool to conceptualize agency. For Saba Mahmood, the category of resistance is an imposition of progressive politics, which makes us unable to see and recognize other forms of being and actions. Mahmood proposes to conceptualize agency in terms of positive ethics. I believe Mahmood's critiques of resistance partly stems from her understanding of Abu-Lughod's notion of resistance as a literal resistance against a hegemonic power of patriarchy. However, in her ethnographic account of Bedouin women, Abu-Lughod (1993) discusses the specific forms that an act of resistance can take in response to the multiplicity of their motivations and struggles.

In line with Abu-Lughod, in his ethnographic account of Senegalese Muslim women religious leaders, Joseph Hill (2018) discusses the effectiveness of studying resistance as an analytical approach toward conceptualization of agency. Hill (2018) suggests that in order to understand other forms of being and actions that are not encapsulated by universalistic

projects of liberal notions and assumptions with their specific genealogies in western societies, instead of decoupling agency from resistance, it is most fruitful to decouple both from progressive politics' goals and projects. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that Senegalese women are unaware of discourses like liberation, or that their lived experiences are distanced or isolated from these liberal concepts: "they appropriate the universalism invested in these hegemonic terms yet appropriate them in a different universalizing project."

Mahmood (2005) argues for an alternative conception of agency, by expanding our focus to also study how one inhabits norms. Also In line with Foucault, she argues that we should think about agency in terms of cultivating certain skills to create the capacity to undertake a specific moral action. To elaborate on her argument, she points out the example of taking piano lessons, one might subordinate herself to "painful regime of disciplinary practice" to be able to achieve mastery as a pianist. In the same vein, when I asked Zohreh why is she still wearing chador-a long black veil- in a women-only park, she referred to wearing chador as more than a religious duty but as a life-style she tries to lead (regardless of men's presence) to cultivate humility and modesty as a virtue in a public place where one's clothing can be the point of show-off or comparison with one another. In response to Mahmood, Hill argues: "to inhabit, uphold, or apply a norm is necessarily to resist competing norms, alternative interpretations or application of the same norm." There are multiple regimes of power, operating in different scales, shaping different and multiple sources of motivations and struggles. With this line of thinking, in the latter example from my fieldwork, Zohreh is

upholding a modest life-style and at the same time she is resisting to live a luxurious life which is against her moral values. One of the conservative women I met in a religious event in the park told me:

> "I don't like to see Muslim women listening to music and moving their bodies like that. It's not appropriate. But if we stop coming to this park, it will be exactly what they want. We should come and have our religious meetings here. Dancing is a temporary fun, we should seek spiritual long-lasting pleasure. For the establishment of Islam in this country millions of lives have been sacrificed in the revolution and the war. This is why Daesh (ISIS) could not touch us. We think war is over but it is not, we are in a cultural war."

I find myself identifying as a Muslim more often amongst non-Iranians, something I would have found unnecessary to discuss or even a private personal matter to discuss if I were living in Iran. I don't look like a typical Muslim woman from Iran. I am well aware that my religious identity can lead to some degree of social discrimination in Canada, and it can be a source of negative/inaccurate stereotyping and a point of judgement toward my lifestyle, my choices of dress, my eating habits, my family, my political views, etc. I am aware of the possibility that my whole complex and sometimes contradicting net of being may be reduced to only this one node in this confusing network.

As someone who does not fall into stereotypical Middle-Eastern, I ask myself: will my silence (in expressing my religious affiliation) feed into reproduction of those stereotypes? As someone struggling to shape a meaningful and consistent connection with my doubts and struggles, is it truthful to identify myself as a Muslim? As someone witnessing insecurities and

sometimes lack of confidence that is common in my fellow Muslim immigrants to identify their ethnic or religious background, should I set an example to my friends to take that stolen pride back? As someone with the lived experience of living in a country where not being a Muslim, or the state-advertised 'Muslim', can be a source of severe legal and/or social discrimination, and sometimes can be a crime or even be subject to capital punishment in some cases, what should I do in solidarity with all those (including relatives and friends) who have lost many opportunities in life or have even lost loved ones in fighting these religious battles? In identifying with my religious background, these are the kind of questions I try to answer. Is there even 'one' Islam that I'm dealing with here in this struggle? Can announcing my religious affiliation be interpreted as "resistance" or "subordination"?

Reading about the notion of agency made me realize an interesting point about my fieldwork and also made me reflect on my personal life. I could analyze my observations from my fieldwork and interpret my interviews in almost all of the analytical approaches to notion of agency. What I want to interject is that they all are sensible analysis and are based on some truth, a truth that is shaped by the observer's larger political views and goals which are difficult - not impossible - to minimize in our analytical approach. The following is an example from my fieldwork to expand on that concept:

To my surprise in women-only parks, there were a lot of women still wearing headscarf (some wearing even the most conservative form of veiling), in a place where they are not required by law or common discursive Islam in Iran to observe veiling. On the contrary, the very purpose of the establishment of these parks is for women to remove their veiling, so they are

encouraged by the state to do so. I can see how this can be interpreted as "internalized Islamic patriarchy," so they cannot celebrate or even realize the opportunities for their "liberation." Also, I see how women wearing their headscarf where they are encouraged by authorities to remove it, can be phrased as a fundamental contradiction. On the other hand, women's persistence to observe veiling, and resisting all discourses which permit and encourage removing of the veil in a women-only place, can be understood as "negative agency," or not seeing them resisting at all.

Women wearing headscarves in women-only parks ranged from the most conservative form of headscarf in Iran which is a long black veiling with an open front called *chador*, to short ones with colorful patterns, which only cover half of the head. When I asked those women observing veiling in the park why were they observing, I got a variety of responses. The most common answer was that they felt most comfortable with their veiling on. This is not a surprise to me, as far as I can recall, I had never seen my grandmother, "Naneh," without a headscarf. However her two braids of henna-dyed hair coming down from her scarf were something I will always remember her with. My grandparent's life was very unconventional for their generation. Naneh was very tall, from a wealthy family who married someone younger and shorter than herself and from a lower social class. My grandfather, "Agha" always respected Naneh in a way that I have never seen in my grandparents' or even my parents' generation. Naneh never thought of herself as a strict religious person. According to my mother she started praying when she was in her 40s. She was anti-Islamic Republic of Iran, blaming them for economic

hardship and for manipulating Islam to serve their own agenda. However, even in pictures of Naneh when she was young and not religious, I can't find her without her headscarf.

Zohreh was sitting on a bench with her friend. Both were in their 50s. Zohreh was a housewife, and her friend was a teacher. They were drinking tea in two identical clear cups from a large flask. There were some sun-dried raisins and dried white berries, dates in a small bowl and a bag full of salted sunflower seeds. When we started talking they offered me a new cup to drink tea. At first, I wondered, why would they have extra cups with them? After living in Canada I have become accustomed to pack as lightly as possible when going out for a picnic and to value privacy while in a public place such as a park, keeping distance and minding my own business. But in Iran people make friends in public places, and we always share our food or at least make the gesture by offering our food to people who may hear the smell or see the food.

When I asked Zohreh, why is she still wearing her chador? She replied: "it's still a public place, I feel shy and uncomfortable to show off my hair." When I emphasised the women-only nature of the park, she replied:

> in men's presence it's my religious duty. But it's not all about men, even when men are not around, it's a way of life. I value modesty in public and living a simple life. It's a simple black chador which is covering all other things, things we Iranians constantly compare with one another, it is toxic. For example, no one can see my purse, my scarf, may coat, my watch, my jewellery, or whether I have dyed my hair recently, and if it is the latest trend or not.

Shohreh was covering her hair with a colorful and less conservative type of scarf. She explained: “I am having bad hair day. That’s why I’m having my scarf on.” Undyed grey hair is another similar reason why some women still keep their scarf on. This comes partly from the formality of public places in Iran. We dress up to go outside, even to buy a bottle of soda from a convenience store. The last two quotes can relate to Homa Hoodfar (1997) discussing economic function of veiling in Egypt. Veiling makes fashion cheaper and makes women stop worrying about the state of their hair or other pieces of clothing and accessories.

Sarah and Bahareh were sitting on a navy-blue blanket watching their children play. Sarah was 31 years old and had an MSc in Environmental Science. She was wearing a white short coat with open front and blue jeans. She was wearing a colorful scarf and most of her hair was visible. When I asked her why she was still wearing her scarf, she smiled and replied: “Am I?.” She explained that she forgot to remove it. She explained it’s not something that she immediately does as soon as she enters the park. Although she considered herself as a practising Muslim, she didn’t regard veiling as religious duty. She thought of it as a mis-interpretation of the verses of Quran. However she told me:

> if tomorrow they (Islamic Republic of Iran) remove the veiling obligation, I will still wear my scarf in public. Because I do not feel safe to appear in public without it. Because men are not ready yet. I used to think if a man sees me with a child, he will not think of harassing a mother, but even now I still experience name-calling and harassment. Now that hijab is mandatory, men can’t tell if it is my choice or not, but if tomorrow I go out without headscarf they may think I am interested.

Taking pictures is not allowed in the park, but as many other things in Iran there is not a direct link between prohibition and actual practice. For example, drinking alcohol in Iran is strictly banned, but many Iranians drink smuggled or homemade alcoholic beverages that are available on the black market. Another example is veiling. The way women cover their hair today is dramatically different from how it was expected thirty years ago. What was considered a 'bad-hijab' thirty years ago is widely accepted today. Having a boyfriend or girlfriend is another example; authorities in Iran can arrest two people in public places if they are not related either by kin or marriage. However, having a boyfriend or a girlfriend especially in the last decade is more accepted by Iranian families and now having an intimate relationship before marriage is a part of the lived experience of most young Iranians living in big cities. Although taking pictures is officially not allowed in the park, women are constantly taking selfies and group pictures using their cellphones, and some even bring professional cameras. Fear of being captured in an unwanted photo is another reason why some women prefer, mostly for religious reasons or a sense of privacy, to always have their scarf on.

I wanted to emphasize two points by drawing on my fieldwork, first to show how my political project or goal can impose a filter to my observation as well as how it can guide my analysis. Second, to elaborate on multiplicity and complexity of motivations and struggles for a single act on an everyday life basis. Even some of these motivations may even be invisible to my ethnographic sensibilities, or deliberately hidden (or unintentionally) in my interviewees' responses, as I am carrying the identity of a researcher.

Reading and thinking about agency made me also to think and learn about myself. Reflecting on a stage of my life where I could be easily fit into the narrative of Muslim women victim. As someone who has been raised in a relatively traditional family, I never thought of myself as a victim. Even when my family found out about my secret boyfriend at the age of 17 and I was convinced into marrying him I was not a victim. At the time of my marriage, I thought I was doing the right thing by resisting the non-pious lifestyle that was becoming more popular (with the introduction of internet and social media) in my generation, one example being to have sexual relationships outside marriage. And partly I was resisting my controlling parents. Also partly I was fulfilling my sexual curiosity in a context where other safe venues to explore it were out of the picture. And above all I was affirming my love and commitment to someone I loved since I was 15. Soon after I got married, I realized it was a mistake, not the marriage itself though, but the person I married to. Although I was married but I was living with my parents until I could go to college the year after and reach a more socially-acceptable age for my parents to announce our marriage. What convinced/forced my family to the decision was their great concern regarding the possibility of outside marriage pregnancy. There was no record of divorce in our entire family and extended relatives. So, getting a divorce was even a greater 'dishonor' to the reputation of my family than having a boyfriend or marrying in a young age. In Iran getting a divorce is a unilateral right for men, although there are rare circumstances (and hard and time consuming to prove) where women can ask for a divorce, none of which applied to me. If a man is not willing to divorce and those circumstances are not applicable, it can take years for a woman to finally get her divorce. So, I had to be manipulative (letting my ex-

husband feel it's a win for him if we get a divorce) to get out of an unhealthy relationship. All those months that I was trying to get my divorce I never thought I was resisting patriarchy (I was not even familiar with term the way I am today) or Islam, I only thought I was resisting an unsuitable life partner and unfortunate circumstances which I had a very active/agentive role in leading myself into. I got a divorce when I was 19.

I ask myself: how would I feel if I saw my experience of getting married under very complex circumstances being interpreted by some scholar as an example of merely being a victim of my religion or patriarchy? How would I feel if I saw my resistance toward something, which I held to be not morally right, being interpreted simply as false consciousness? How would I feel if I saw my struggle to get out of an unhealthy relationship, be interpreted as trying the "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985) in a moment when I felt so strong?

It all comes down to this:

Beside all the harms these 'analytical' terms would do to my self-realization and my ability to assert myself and to take responsibility for my actions and decisions and finally to recover, how effective are these terms and phrases in capturing numerous objects of my struggles, or in untangling the multiplicity of my motivations? On the other hand what are the productive aspects of these kinds of analysis? Politically charged observations and analysis will lead to politically driven solutions and recommendations. These types of analysis have resulted in policies and programs that are very distant from women's experiences.

One widespread yet harmful assumption behind many such analyses is that all women across the world want more or less the same thing. Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) warn us

against such assumptions which make us unable to see and realize other forms of living and being. They argue for other "possibilities of human flourishing" (353) not necessarily through the same set of desires, hopes, and struggles embraced by liberals and progressives. The way we articulate and analyze Muslim women's lives becomes even more crucial especially during a crisis such as war and a wave of refugees moving to Western countries.

Acknowledging the difference and multiplicity of desires, goals and motivations of Muslim women whom we study is not by any means to take a "cultural relativism" stance and refuse to realize their struggles and pain as something we cannot do something about. Rather, it is to be critical towards solutions, programs, petitions, and interventions that have little to do with women's own perceived realties and experiences.

Drawing back on the compulsory veiling in Iran, I am not sympathetic to the compulsory nature of veiling in Iran but I am very skeptical towards the international endorsements the My Stealthy Freedom campaign is receiving as well as its own fetishization of the veil and polarization of the discourse around it. I am asking: by advocating for more sanctions and "targeted" military intervention against Iran to pressure the state to abandon compulsory veiling, why hasn't the violence of sanctions on ordinary Iranians, more specifically on Iranian women been addressed as well in the discussion?

Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) summarizes this approach in the following paragraph:

> In light of global reach of rights work and rights talk, and their implication in forceful projects to mold human lives, I would rather to use my knowledge and experience into the worlds of powers that authorize and naturalize rights work and sometimes

> dangerous understandings of human social life to which they are made to give rise. I would rather recognize that societies everywhere debate justice, struggle over power and right, and seek change. Others may choose differently. But I hope that it will be on the basis of careful analysis, critical self-reflection, and constant recognition of our common humanity, a humanity subjected to different forces and expressed in different registers.

In my research I have tried to understand what women want their everyday acts of resistance and agency to mean, rather than emphasising what I want these acts to mean. Asef Bayat (2013) believes that: “certain distinct and unconventional forms of agency and activism have emerged in the region that do not get adequate attention, because they do not fit into our prevailing categories and conceptual imaginations.”

Chapter 4. Connectedness: Realizing New Realities

Mutual recognition

I was walking to get to the café in the women-only park to get a cold drink and saw a small group of women standing and watching as if something unusual was happening. Curious, I approached the crowd, but by the time I arrived there, they were already dispersing. I asked a woman—herself unveiled but modestly dressed—about the incident, and she pointed out a young girl and said that one of the staff had given her notice to wear more appropriate clothing. However, she added, some women—she pointed at a middle-aged woman wearing *chador* (a black cloak)—stood up for her, and we all joined her in supporting the young woman. I looked at the young girl who had gotten the notice. She was wearing a white, tight, strapless tank top and black jeans. The woman continued:

> As if we buy these clothes from America—we buy our clothing from Iranian stores. If it's not appropriate to wear it in a women-only place, where else should we wear it? Is it written somewhere in the park what should we wear or not wear? Some women are jealous—because they can't wear these clothes, they don't want to see other women wear them either, and when they get some power, they abuse it.
>
> When I asked about the staff's response, she continued:
>
> We all shared what we thought with her. She understood she was harsh on the young girl. She said she is not saying the young girl is not allowed in the park, but she's worried some very young girls who learn and imitate immediately will get the wrong impression. She said this place should be a family friendly place. The staff may be right in general,

but not now in this day and age. Everybody has a cellphone now, they can find what they are looking for—it's not like 10 years ago.

My initial response to this incident was to think about the state's continuous intervention and control over women's bodies and their choices even in gender-segregated places. Then I wondered whether it was possible to impose a formal dress code at women-only parks as opposed to imposing individual authorities' personal opinions. I was determined to follow this up through reliable sources. As I continued to think about the incident, what interested me further was women standing up for one another, especially in this particular case a woman with more conservative form of dress supporting apparently a less "modest" one. I was more interested in a new form of solidarity and a form of problem solving.

This kind of solidarity is not necessarily formed in an organized network of women, such as NGOs or other institutions, but in public places and through observing a shared identity, a mutual recognition of being a woman and being subjected to control and getting notices from authorities. Women-only place emphasise that shared identity. In the context of Iran where women are subject of what Foucault's calls "institutionalized bodily discipline," this implies a great shift in the perception of space and place in a space occupied exclusively by women. (Foucault 1977, Arjmand 2017)

In this chapter I explore the formation of "passive network" and community formation. I will also explore the Iranian notion of *Urf* which can be understood as hegemonic ways of doing things in a particular historical and spatial context. However, its dominance extends beyond

customs and traditions, such that it produces and reproduces an unwritten, and unofficial normative constitution.

In his book, *Life as Politics,* Asef Bayat (2013) coined the phrase "social nonmovements" and "passive networks." He defines nonmovement as "the collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations." He discusses how nonmovements are important venues for social change under authoritarian patriarchal states. These actions take the form of everyday life practises, not a political protest. The non-organized nature of these actions and their embeddedness in everyday life practices make them hard to identify and supress, which makes it possible for them to gradually advance into the realm of power and makes themselves resilient against suppression. However what distinguishes them from the ordinary flow of life is the fact that they are contentious. They are extralegal and they challenge/modify existing norms. A gender-segregated space such as a women-only park emphasises women's shared identities, and a "passive network" can be shaped.

There is a morality police in Iran called *Gasht-e Ershad,* or "guidance patrol," which sets up check stops in crowded places on random days. They park their vans on the side of the street, and two officers—usually women—inspect pedestrians' hijab to make sure their scarf is covering enough of their hair, ensure that their coat is not too short and that their jeans are not too tight. If the pedestrians' hijab is deemed "not good enough" they are escorted to the van and they are usually taken back to a police station where they are forced to sign a declaration

saying that they will observe their hijab in the future. Although state's preferred dress code for women is a long black chador, no official statement specifies the exact minimum acceptable hijab for women, how much hair may be visible, or how long and how tight coats and jeans can acceptably be. It mainly becomes the officer's interpretation and personal preference and, more importantly, what is practiced by the majority of women, as the officers cannot arrest hundreds of women everyday.

Women who defy the state's mandatory and preferred hijab by dressing on the blurry borderline of what is acceptable recognize their shared visible identity, and it is through this mutual recognition that women who have passed by the check stop, warn other women going in the direction of the check stop—by hand gesture or just few words—about the morality police's presence. At the same time, they normalize their choice of clothing when it's worn by large number of women, gaining confidence to push the boundaries of what is accepted and at the same time protecting each other from possible notice or arrest. According to Bayat, "common threat" is what can lead this passive network to engage in collective actions.

Bayat (2013) argues that the possibility of leading to organized collective action is not what makes this network valuable. Rather, by this gradual intervention, Iranian women in these passive networks, have come to occupy more than half of university seats in science, engineering, law, medicine, social sciences and arts as well as claiming their share in the job market. These gradual changes are hard to identify when they are in the process of occurring and are therefore difficult to supress. They are most durable and successful in the context of authoritarian states.

Asef Bayat's articulation of the importance of collective actions in time of constrains is close to Michel de Certeau's argument in *practice of everyday life*. Certeau (1984), elaborated on how native South Americans subverted the Spanish colonizers' "success" from within, not by openly rejecting or altering rituals and laws imposed on them, but by through acceptance and re-appropriation of them.

Having said all this is not to undermine the importance and significance of extraordinary acts of protest and activism. Homa Darabi is among many Iranian women who risked their lives to oppose the Islamic Republic of Iran's compulsory veiling. Homa Darabi burned herself to death in public as her final act of resistance against mandatory veiling. She was a revolutionary herself, and was imprisoned during Mohammadreza Shah rule. Her story is never to be forgotten from Iranians' collective memory.

My point here is to draw on other forms of social change and agency in the Iranian context. These forms may not get adequate attention because they don't fit into predetermined categories of social change and agency that have been defined and observed in Western contexts. Asef Bayat observes:

> In other words, I am speaking of the agency and perseverance of millions of women, young people, and the dispossessed who, notwithstanding their differences, understand the constraints yet recognize and discover opportunities, and take advantage of the spaces that are available to enhance their life-chances. (Bayat, 2013)

Farida Shaheed (2002) also argues that gender definitions are necessarily a part of every culture and as a result are crucial for the collective identity of any group. Hence, when women,

by rejecting and redefining the roles that are previously designated for them, want to expand and explore their space as women, they are challenging more than what is in their own lives. Shaheed says: "If culture is an expression of a collective identity and if all societies have to address the issue of gender, then redefinitions of gender automatically necessitate a readjustment of the broader culture and collectivity concerned, irrespective of whether the society in question is dynamic or stagnant, ancient or contemporary, atheist or religious, Muslim or non-Muslim."

Exploring the notion of *urf*

Ra'na is in her mid 50's. In my interview with Ra'na, she stated she was from a conservative family and she was the first in their entire family who got a PhD. She was also the first woman ever to hold some of the positions she held in her career. She is a university lecturer and also she runs her own company. When I asked her opinion about gender-segregation she explained:

> I feel a little embarrassed by your question because I never thought of this park as a demonstration of gender-segregation policy, it just has never occurred to me. Generally speaking, I would say I oppose gender-segregation policy. I think men and women should be able to work together and grow together in a society to make it balanced; like two wings of a bird. And they should learn this cooperation from a young age. However, I think we should take advantage of any opportunity that reveals itself to us, especially in a society where resources are not distributed fairly. Although I had unconventional choices in life, I was never a rebel. I strictly followed the *urf* (custom) and I think that's how my access to certain things was guaranteed. Yes, I think if we play by *urf* we

increase our chances, we get stronger, then we can change things when we have established ourselves.

Urf, most commonly translated as "custom," acts as a framework telling us what to do or not to do, how to do it, and what are the possible consequences and costs of deciding to do it. It also exceeds legality or religiosity. Arjamand (2008) suggests that *urf* is the best and closest concept to the Foucaultian notion of episteme. In contrast, I think *urf* depends on episteme around it, it's not its equivalent. *Urf* is constantly negotiated and is the object of struggle. On the other hand, *urf* is an emic concept, why should we try to equate an endogenous concept to an outsider concept with a different genealogy.

In his book, *Public urban space, gender and segregation: women-only urban parks in Iran*, Arjmand concludes that a women-only place can guarantee the continuity of the norms: "Utilizing this argument in the context of this volume, one can come to the conclusion that the exchange of knowledge through the process of socialization within a given group and between various members of the group, along with the existence of such traditions in society at large contributes to the continuity and reproduction of given practices by women in public spaces." In contrast to Arjamand's conclusion, I draw from Judith Butler's (1990,1999) notion of performativity. *Urf*, like other norms, are not just to be conformed to or subverted, but are performed in repeated yet always somewhat different enactments. Performativity of norms is both the form in which they continue and what makes them vulnerable to subversion. Within a system of iterations, there always exist possibilities of failure, error, change, and modification.

In other words, the conditions that create the possibility to reproduce an *urf* have also the possibility to destabilize it.

Public spaces are the places where *urf* is most effectively realized and practiced, as it is witnessed by many people. A women-only park is an effective locale for reproduction, modification and change of norms. Such parks are highly active places where women either engage in specific activities or simply talk and socialize. They share their stories, they talk about their struggles with their husbands or younger children in their families. They seek for advice on how to manage their relationship with their mothers-in-law. They share details about recent events they have attended such as weddings or funerals.

Mahtab is a mother of three whose oldest daughter is getting married next year. She is stressed about the cost of dowry. She mentioned that her daughter is the first to get married in their family and is also the first grand-child on both sides. She was also stressed as she was not sure what is the "new norm" these days, telling me:

> Because she is the first to get married, her wedding and dowry will affect her younger siblings too. It has been 10 years since the last wedding in our family, it was when my sister-in-law got married. But everything changes so fast. The good thing about this park is that I meet new people who also have engaged children and are planning for their weddings. We share what we know about new customs. Sometimes because we don't know each other directly we are more honest about our feelings. I got a good grasp of what is new and what are the expectations from both sides of the families.

One other characteristic of women-only parks is that there are one or a very few of them in cities, whereas each neighborhood has its own shared-use parks and green spaces, even if small. At the time of my fieldwork there was only one women-only park in Zanjan. This provides the women-only parks with a unique opportunity of cross-class socialization between women from various backgrounds who live throughout the city. Although gender-segregated, they thus cut through class and other modes of segregation. Therefore, new realities of actions and appropriateness are constantly being realized, talked about, shared with, and re-appropriated to shape and reshape women's meaningful connection with the realities of their own specific life. In her ethnographic account of women in Sudan and Islamization, Nageeb (2004) points to the importance of aspirations in shaping reality:

> In this sense, we work with givens like norms, traditions, social relations, modes of social differentiation, and social order, but we also work with how these are framing what is not yet a reality – that is, dreams and aspiration. Nevertheless, dreams have the same power of shaping social processes, interaction, and relations. Thus, inasmuch as social spaces are temporarily oriented to the givens of a society (i.e., the accumulation of the past as represented in the present), they (social spaces) are future oriented.

In an interview, I asked the former head of the women-only park in Zanjan, I asked her about the restrictions and regulations regarding what are and are not allowed in the park. She explained that the head of women-only parks, herself a woman, is also the head of policy making there. She told me each park is regulated based on the *urf* of that specific city and/or neighborhood:

> We don't want the women who come here to feel their understanding of social space is undermined and feel unwelcomed or uncomfortable, we also don't want to impose so many restrictions that women decide not to come here at all. We want this place to be as inclusive and welcoming as possible, because it is a park for women to enjoy. And sometimes it is hard to maintain that goal. We have to have a middle ground which is in line with our communities' *urf*. Women from different age groups ranging from children and teenagers to adults and seniors share the space. They come from different social, religious, and educational backgrounds. Some women come here to recite Quran and have religious gatherings, and some come here to have a birthday party, to listen to music, and to dance. For the most part they manage it themselves, they negotiate and they try to choose the location of their event while observing groups of women sitting nearby. On several occasions I have seen, they ask other women sitting nearby if they are annoyed by their activities. We try not to intervene unless we see disruption of general order of the park or we receive several complains. We have to accommodate complaints if we want to keep these parks running, as there are many who are looking for an excuse to close these parks.

According to my interview, the heads of women-only parks are women, directly appointed by the mayor who can be either a man or a woman. There used to be a council for women-only parks policy making when these parks were newly introduced, but later on, as the heads of women-only parks got more experienced, this council was dismantled. The overall municipalities' argument regarding management is that the head of women-only park as a

woman and as someone present at park on a daily basis knows what is happening in the parks better than any outsider. The women-only park's head is responsible for general organization and regulations in the women-only park.

What was interesting in my interview with the head of the women-only park was her reference to *urf* as if it had a double nature. Sometimes she was referring to *urf* as a solid legitimate ground for basing her policies on, and in some other occasions she referred to it as possessing a fluid everchanging nature. She explained:

> During the first days of women-only parks' operation, we had a serious issue with the way in which women dressed up coming to the park, we used to receive so many complaints regarding the park not fulfilling its purpose as a family friendly space. Now we don't have such problems. Mostly it was realized and addressed by women themselves. It was a new space in its nature, they didn't know what to wear, gradually they refined their choice of clothing. On the other hand, *urf* is changing too, what was not acceptable to wear 10 years ago is an ordinary choice of clothing today. And I see women showing more tolerance and acceptance too. They come here to enjoy, not to pick fights.

This comment can be understood in light of Judith Butler's (1990,1999) idea of performativity. *Urf* is realized and recognized and is expected to be respected in public places. At the same time, she suggests that *urf* changes in the doing of it. As suggested earlier, women-only parks are places not merely to model or implement social norms, but they also provide a unique opportunity for thousands of women in small cities from different social backgrounds to

observe, learn, negotiate, and change *urf*. This negotiated *urf* is not limited to what is allowed in the park, but it also regards other social practices that are constantly being talked about and performed in the park and that potentially women carry with themselves back home.

Formation of communities

Shakiba is 61 years old. I caught her in a jogging group of 11. She has two children, the younger of whom married five years ago, and she has endured severe depression since then. She explained how depression was destroying her health and her son's marriage:

> I regret it a lot. I saw my daughter-in-law as an enemy who stole my son from me. I said mean things to her and tried to destroy her image in front of my son. They used to come and visit us every week on weekends, then it became once in a month and then my daughter-in-law stopped coming and one day my son came to us, he started crying and told us they have conflicts and are getting a divorce. This was like facing the reality of my actions for me. This was not what I wanted for my son. His wife is an educated, wise, beautiful and kind woman. Everyone in our family loved her. I asked myself, What have I done to my son? I hated myself. I felt guilty and I was going crazy, talking to myself all day. One day my sister asked me to come along with her to the park. She was a regular here with one of her neighbors. I didn't like this place at first but my sister kept insisting. Eventually I found friends, we started talking and sharing our life stories. For the first time I heard about empty nest syndrome. I realized many women experience the same feelings. One of my friends recommended a counselor whom she used to visit, and I started therapy sessions. I apologized to my daughter-in-law and we have a good

relationship now. I met new friends here, I joined a walking group and we walk 10k every other day. This place saved me.

One of my most interesting observations in the women-only park was witnessing women engage in shared activities. The size of the groups ranged from small groups of three to larger groups of twenty and engaged in diverse activities: reading books, cycling, walking, studying, doing yoga, reading Qur'an and religious books, holding cooking contests, etc.

Women-only parks are providing hundreds of thousands of women a space where they can assert themselves and make themselves heard and realized. Thomas Henricks (2006) tells us, "to play together is to commit to one another, to affirm that these moments spent together…are valuable." Saghar is 38 and married. She has a high school diploma. She expressed her experience: "All-women parks make me feel powerful. Sometimes I wonder why we didn't have this in the first place. I feel we can rule the world."

Akram is 44 and unemployed. She has a degree in Kinesiology. She is not originally from Zanjan but moved here 12 years ago because of her husband's job. She expressed how the first years were the most difficult for her, as she didn't have any other family or friends here. She described her experience in the women-only park as:

> Some days all I needed was someone I could have a cup of tea with. My husband used to come from work at around 4 pm and he was very tired most days. I couldn't find any friends. There were not many places in the city where I could go and make friends. But in the 5 years since I started coming here, it has become my second home. We have

formed a cooking club imitating that TV show[3]. We are 5 couples and on the first weekend of each month, we get together at the house of the host of the dinner for that night. We provide feedback and we have a winner at the end of each round. Our husbands are also in charge of salad and dessert.

It is a place where they can learn things that are prohibited, restricted, or inaccessible to them elsewhere. They form new friendships and communities. They share their struggles and listen to others. They learn certain skills such as riding a bicycle or meditation. They show off their talent in playing musical instruments and dancing. They share their knowledge and experiences through talking about them, and the things they learn and experience cannot be unlearned when they leave these spaces. They may or may not apply their newfound skills elsewhere when opportunities arise, yet history shows that at least some of them will. They will claim their share in spaces restricted to them, and when they claim it in large numbers, they will push the boundaries for what is accepted for women to do.

One may argue that women are only using this space as long as men or the patriarchal system permits it. Also, they wouldn't need such spaces of relative freedom if their "true freedom" had not been taken away from them in public places in the first place. But even if that is the case, isn't this the reality of these women who struggle to shape a meaningful connection based on their own understanding of their reality? Haven't they enhanced their lives based on

[3] There is a popular Farsi TV show being produced in UK and streamed in a satellite TV, called "Befarmaeed Shaam" or dinner is ready. The show is about couples making dinner and other couples (contestants) ranking their food.

this reality? What are the possibilities and alternatives that do not compromise millions of Iranian women's' sense of well-being?

On the other hand, some may try to identify subtle acts of resistance against patriarchy in these places such as dancing, playing music and having book clubs, and to celebrate a tiny feminist living in their hearts, "resisting sisters" who will subvert patriarchy. The analytical approach of looking for instances of resistance to patriarchy owes a lot to longstanding discourses that frame Muslim women in fixed narratives of helpless victims in need of "saving" or "rescuing." However my research does not focus on identifying women's actions as either resisting or reproducing patriarchy.

First of all, I didn't observe patriarchy being a meaningful hegemonic category to most women who are shaping an underground market in metro train cars out of financial necessity or to women dancing and biking in women-only parks for the sole purpose of enjoying it. Even in the case of hijab, as the most contested symbol of Muslim women, many Iranian women express their opposition to compulsory hijab, using anti-sate rhetoric rather than anti-Islam, or anti-patriarchy rhetoric. Soosan was watching her daughter as she was sliding on the slide in the playground:

> I am happy for my daughter. She is living in a better environment compared to my childhood's environment. They (state) took our happiness away in the name of Islam. But God says there is no compulsion in religion. And everyone is equal before God and we are judged only based on our piousness. I wish we had a park like this back when I

was a child. So, we could dance, play, and simply breathe. But in our time, everything was “haram.”

By boxing their activities into the duality of resisting or reproducing, I would be intervening in their reality by imposing my differently informed reality shaped by my academic training. Furthermore, the duality of resistance/reproduction is not a sufficient analytical tool to fully and accurately capture the complexity of Muslim women’s experiences, struggles and motivations. What I am interested in—as I have tried to some extent to demonstrate in this chapter—is examining recently established women-only places in Iran as spaces where new realities and new categories are being realized and formed. I am interested in finding out how women, each with a unique lived experience, with different sets of struggles and hopes, make use of these places and how, in doing so, they enhance their meaningful connections to the larger world, material or immaterial, physical or metaphysical. I am interested in finding out what these activities in women-only places mean to women themselves, regardless of how liberating or oppressing these actions may seem. Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002), in recognizing different sets of desires and hopes in the context of veiling, argue that this very acknowledgment has enabled us to recognize Muslim societies “for something other than misogyny and patriarchal violence.” They conclude: “Our ability to respond, morally and politically, in a responsible way to these forms of violence will depend on extending these powers of sight.”

The next chapter follows the promises of this chapter to realize women's own experience and understanding of these spaces, and how they relate to it in women-only section of the train cars.

Chapter 5. It's Illegal but It's Halal

New to the city

I'm on a bus on my way to Tehran from Zanjan. I sounded "new to the city" when I was offered login information to a Wi-Fi network on the bus and I acted very surprise. Tehran is located almost 300km to the east of Zanjan. With metropolitan population of 16 million, Tehran is the most populated and also the capital city of Iran. Tehran's political significance is not the only reason that attracts migrants from all over the country to live and work there. Housing Iran's top universities, factories, and companies' headquarters, Tehran is the country's educational and industrial capital too. Politics, education, and job market are among the main contributing factors to Tehran's population fluctuation between night and day (12 million during nights), as many come from closer towns to work or study in Tehran.

With Tehran's ever-growing population, transportation is the city's major management issue. The first planning for underground train in Tehran was established in 1970s. Revolution and War halted the project and the first line started operating in 1999 connecting Tehran to Karaj. Today, Tehran's metro train has 9 operating lines with 115 stations. Given the number of people who use metro train cars daily, one should start making one's way to the door a couple of stations ahead of one's destination. Mina one of the peddlers I interviewed noted: "Islam is irrelevant to the existence of these women-only train cars, you have to be here during rush hours to see how people shove and push each other to get on the trains, imagine the chance for sexual harassment and the inevitable physical contact between men and women if it were not for these women-only cars." Although more trains have been added, the number of lines

has increased, and the coverage area has expanded in the past decades, transportation and car traffic remain a challenge for the city. Metro cars owe their popularity in Tehran to a number of advantages: they circumvent Tehran's heavy traffic, provide a fast ride, avoid summer heat (as hot as 45 Celcius), and escape air pollution.

After leaving Zanjan at 6:00 AM, I arrived in Tehran at 10 AM. As soon as I got off the bus, a group of taxi drivers approached the bus and each asked where I was going and offered a price to beat competitors. In the past decade due to Iran's crumbling economy amid the US sanctions, many Iranians are facing difficulties making ends meet. Furthermore, as medicines are also targeted, these unjust sanctions have significantly contributed to the rise of the price of medical needs and have created a black market with skyrocketing prices that can bankrupt any middle-class family. Furthermore, many businesses are struggling and failing, contributing to the unemployment rate. This economic situation has led many to consider taxi driving as their main job or second or third job to level off their living costs. Even when I refused, a couple of them followed me, asking me where I was going and how much I was wiling to pay.

I usually choose to commute with public transportation. The fact that I was doing my fieldwork was another reason to prefer bus and metro over taxis. Besides, I still carry the insecurity of a young woman from a small town in a big city I don't know well, and drivers tend to go through often narrow alleys to avoid the street traffic.

As I came out of the bus station onto the street, I searched for a vantage point from which to see the peak Damavand, the highest peak in Iran located 70km from northeast of Tehran. Not only it is beautiful to watch its snow-covered peak, but its visibility is a natural

gauge of air pollution. I could see it, although not very vividly and clearly. There was a bus station just in the area. I asked around which line had a stop closest to the metro station I was going to. I stepped in a bus from the back door, the section designated for women. There were no signs from the outside designating the women-only section of the bus, but in the middle of the bus there was a short glass wall separating the women's section from the men's section at the front of the bus. However, anyone who wished could easily pass underneath it. It is not uncommon for women to sit on the men's side when all the seats are taken, but the opposite is not the case, as it is frowned upon for a man to try to enter the women-only section. The same applies to metro train cars. Three out of seven train cars are women-only, but there are no restrictions regarding women entering other sections. Public transportation, then, is not so much divided to men's and women's sections as into mixed and women-only sections, both in terms of practice and regulations.

When I got on the bus from the back door, I found that all seats were taken. I stood next to a nearly waist-high metal rod that marked the division between the sections. I was about to open Google Maps to find out where should I be getting off, but I asked a passenger instead. As instructed, I got off at Azadi station and I walked through its entrance to the trains. Tehran's metro trains, for most part, are underground, so one has to take long stairs or escalators to reach the boarding area. Just before the gates where the tickets were scanned, there was a booth to buy tickets. There were three major types of tickets: 1) One time trip 2) Length of travel-based 3) Time-based (annual). I bought time-based ticket, which could be used

throughout a year for as many times as needed. I was planning to give it to my friend with whom I was staying once I was done with my fieldwork.

I passed the gates and saw a very long escalator. There were maps on the wall. I was headed for the train on line 4. I reached the boarding platform of the line 4. The first thing that caught my eye were three women sitting on chairs having large black bags full of items such as hair accessories, socks, and dishwashing sponges. Unlike many people around me, I was neither in rush nor going to a specific destination. In 3 minutes the train arrived, as soon as I entered the train I saw two young women, one of whom was wearing a disposable white mask (It was quite common among peddlers to wear a mask partly to hide their identity so they couldn't be easily recognized by their relatives, and partly in response to rumors about Lead pollution), advertising for their items. The first one was selling lingerie. She was advertising each lingerie based on the tone of skin color and body shape they would suit perfectly to. The other woman was selling temporary tattoos or so-called fake tattoos. Three young girls were carefully looking at samples of fake tattoos and asking each another's opinion. Another woman was searching in the bag full of lingerie. What caught my eye was a woman with her daughter - probably 7 years old - covering her daughter's eyes with her chador, presumably so she would not be able to see the lingerie. Another woman asked the peddler selling lingerie in a complaining tone to lower her voice so she could hear the person she was speaking to on the phone. At the next station the one selling temporary tattoos left the car as she already had a sale. Two other women entered the train carrying their heavy bags. One of them was in her 60s and the other women

in early 30s. The older woman was selling scarves and the other woman was selling handmade necklaces and earrings.

Somewhere in between

Roya was 38. She had a BA in Persian Literature. Her husband was in jail for some financial matter. She told me that, for the past three years, she had been selling scarves, socks, hair accessories, and nail polish on train cars. She talked about her first day: “The first day I started, it was the worst day of my life, I wish I had never been born, a part of my soul was crushed. For the first few weeks I could not raise my head, I could not advertise, I had zero sales. When I went back home, I decided to kill myself. I wish I never had children, but I did, so tomorrow morning I went back again.” I held her hands and tried hard not to burst into tears.

I was thinking about my identity as a “native anthropologist.” How native I am to the lived experience of women carrying those large and heavy baggage from one car to another for 3 to 10 hours a day, advertising for their items in public, dealing with unkind looks and judgments, dealing with the possibility of security guards showing up any moment taking all of their investment, dealing with the ‘embarrassment’ of being recognized and wearing a mask to hide their identity, having a job with no benefits, no social security, and with lots of stigma. I wondered how my academic training in Canada, and how learnt categories and theories with their genealogy in Western context, is sufficient to equip me with proper tools to understand, categorize and analyze the story of women I am interviewing and observing, to represent them? Is there such a thing as a true native anthropology or a true insider? As much as I am “new to the city,” I am new to these lived experiences.

Kirin Narayan (1993) argues that the point of focus in our texts regarding the people we are trying to represent should be the quality of relations with the same people: She asks: “Are they viewed as mere fodder for professionally self-serving statements about a generalized Other, or they are accepted as subjects with voices, views and dilemmas—people to whom we are bonded through ties of reciprocity and who may even be critical of our professional enterprise.” By referring to biculturalism of the anthropologist—simultaneously being committed to the world of scholarly process and also driven by touched life experiences—she argues for enactment of hybridity in our texts: “writing texts that mix lively narratives and rigorous analysis involves enacting hybridity, regardless of our origins.”

During my thesis I have shared some personal experiences. It may be in response to the constant struggle I was dealing with during my research. The back and forth journey of representing Iranian women as a researcher, and at the same time being represented in my own research as an Iranian woman. Abu-lughod describe the situation as an uneasy travel between speaking “for” and speaking “from.”

Underground mobile market

> Body-reflexive practices … are not internal to the individual. They involve social relations and symbolism; they may well involve large-scale institutions. Particular versions of masculinity [and femininity] are constituted in their circuits as meaningful bodies and embodied meanings. Through body-reflexive practices, more than individual lives are formed: a social world is formed.
> Raewyn Connell, From *Masculinities*, 2005

I think it’s a genius idea. Win-Win for everyone. I always support these women and shop from them regularly. Some of them have been working for many years here and I know

some by name. Not only are their prices good and it saves me the trouble of searching for what I want, but they are women like me. They are in financial difficulty, and they are working hard to provide for their families. I think it should be honored. I admire their courage.

Shirin explained why she shops from peddlers. She is a PhD student in Civil Engineering, I was siting next to her on my first day at fieldwork in metro train cars.

Women venders are a part of Tehran's metro train cars' most visible identity. It is almost impossible to imagine a trip on metro train cars without seeing peddlers and hearing their advertisements. It's a mobile underground market. It is estimated that around 2500 peddlers are active on a daily basis. They can earn up to as much as an income of a professional fulltime employee depending on their time investment and popularity of their items.

There are many factors contributing to everyday growth of number of women (and men) peddlers. The most important one is Iran's crumbling economy and sanctions against Iran, resulting in middle class shrinkage in Iran. Flexible hours, no tax, no utility bills, no sale associate, and most importantly being in a women-only space, are among other factors, which has made this an accessible job opportunity. On the other hand, for the same reasons, the prices of the items they sell are almost half of the similar items on regular market. Furthermore, it saves customers time and energy to shop while they are commuting, another reason why many passengers also welcome it.

Although I could not identify any form of organized union or formal network of women working in train cars, in my interviews and observations, I realized there are unwritten rules,

which most women try to accommodate. For example they don't enter a car if there are already two or three other women selling their items. They don't advertise at the same time, they do it in turn so each get a chance to advertise and also passengers could hear them clearly and properly. They don't enter a car if there are other women selling similar items. And most of them lower their voice when advertising if they notice a passenger talking on the phone. These unwritten yet collective rules can be understood as women's attempt to shape a "passive network" discussed in earlier chapter, where "groups pursue strategies to produce and reproduce the conditions of their collective existence" (Hillier and Rooksby, 2002). They may seem like necessary rules to keep the business going. However, the same unwritten rules don't seem to be applied in non-segregated sections. I once observed three men in non-segregated section all selling batteries and "advertising" (just yelling the prices) at the same time as loud as possible.

On the other side of this story is the Tehran Urban and Suburban Railway Corporation trying to manage more than three million passengers on a daily basis. Given the number of peddlers, they are disturbing the orderly process of getting in and out of the train cars. They have large baggage, which makes it difficult for other passengers to find space. They are advertising and disturbing the expected peace in public transportation system. Sometimes they engage in conflicts with their customers. Adding to the conflict, Tehran's baazaaries (business owners) are also constantly complaining to the city about the decline in their business and profit due to the rise of the underground metro market. Also, some concerns have been raised

regarding the quality of the products they are selling. There is no control over the items, which very well could be smuggled items with no quality control labels.

The only action that Tehran Urban and Suburban Railway Corporation has taken so far is random checks on metro train cars, and to have a few small permanent shops at stations, which can accommodate very few of the peddlers. On random check days, the authorities remove women from cars and take their entire baggage. Sometimes it gets aggressive and violent. The rapid growing number of peddlers is one evidence of this policy's failure. In response to this policy, women have come up with strategies to deal with officers and how to let the other women know about random check days. Also, Tehran Urban and Suburban Railway Corporation advises passengers through video clips on stations, boards and recorded messages on trains not to shop from peddlers. However, given the popularity of this mobile market, this doesn't seem to have worked either.

Imani, a sociologist based in Iran, in an interview with EghtesadOnline magazine argues that the main issue regarding peddlers is the economic policies which has forced many middle-class citizens to drop below poverty line. He claims if the city or any organization wants to solve this problem systematically, they should first address the issue of poverty.

There are some rumors too; such as high lead pollution in metro stations, or some items being infected with harmful viruses and bacteria, and also peddlers being organized and recruited by black market and smugglers. And some believe they have a great income, and they are working here not out of necessity but because they want more. In my interviews most

women believed these rumors to be coming from metro train management to discourage peddlers from working and others from shopping in metro train cars.

Fatemeh is 52 years old. She has high school diploma and she is single. In response to the rumors she explained:

> I have not quit some fancy job. I used to work at peoples' houses. Cleaning their washrooms, doing their dishes, and washing the buildings' stairs. Some didn't let their children be around me as if I had some illness. Sometime they didn't pay me after 12 hours of work, or paid me with their leftover food and unwanted clothes instead of money. And these were people with high social standing. Any woman who thinks we work here out of greed, I invite them all, to do the work we are doing here only for one day, to drag these heavy bags from one car to another, to hear all sort of nasty things we hear, to experience the pain, the embarrassment, the fear and insecurity, all combined with a severe exhaustion.

On another occasion I met Shakiba, She is 20. She is Accounting student. She started working here two months ago to save money for her nose job. She explained: "My dad is retired with little income. it doesn't feel right to ask him to pay for my surgery. On the other hand, I really want to do this, I hate my nose." I asked about the kind of responses she receives when she says she is saving up for plastic surgery, she replied:

> I don't understand people who have problem with my little income here, I am getting paid for what I'm working very hard for, no one is holding them back if they think they can do it, they should. If the city or anyone in the government has a problem with my

job, they should first find those people in government who are stealing millions and millions of our money so their children could have luxurious life in the United States and we are naïve enough to 'like' these children' pictures on Instagram. They all say down with America, yet their children are studying in American universities. If the economy was right here, my dad wouldn't have to pay rent and still not own a house after thirty years of teaching. I don't have any problem if you want to send this recording to the government.

It's illegal but its halal

There used be a lot of them [officers] before, but now they only show up very few times a year. we have two children, we have no savings, this is the only option I've got, I don't care if some people think we are disturbing their peace on metro lines, I don't care if the city says it's illegal, It's *halal*, the government is not above God, I am responsible before God. they cannot accuse me of anything for the situation they have created."

Hanieh has a BSc in microbiology, unemployed for 7 years, her husband is a microbiologist too. He used to work in a lab and lost his job last year.

It was very interesting to see women drawing on religious discourse to legitimize their job against possible legal sanctions by the government who supposedly draw their legitimacy form religious discourse. Asserting yourself as a committed pious Muslim to legitimize and naturalize the kind of activities which was previously dominated by men, such as having access to public and leading religious meetings has long been practiced by Muslim women. In the 15th century when women's presence in public was highly restricted, an Iranian royal family

member, Goharshad, by emphasising certain religious interpretations was able to pursue her desired activities and make regular public appearances. She established mosques and schools and remained an influential figure in Iran and Afghanistan's History. In her book, Politics of Piety, Saba Mahmood also discusses how Egyptian women assert their right to spaces previously dominated by men and altering mosques' male centred characteristic, by asserting their piety, a kind of piety that secures women's subordination to men. In the same vein, Joseph Hill, in his ethnographic account of Senegalese women religious leaders, argue how Senegalese women leaders protect their unconventional religious authority which is prone to potential controversies, by demonstrating excess of piety.

I initially thought the notion of *halal* (permissible according to Islamic discourse) largely comes from "earning" your income, in contrast to stealing or begging. But it was in later interviews that I realized they regard their job as *halal* because they can avoid contact by men. The first and last cars on trains are exclusively women-only cars, the cars following the first one and the one followed by the last one are divided in half, like buses, half women-only and the other half mixed. Most women peddlers only worked on the first and last cars, and they expressed their resentment against working on women-only half of the mixed cars in very assertive words.

Maryam is in her late 50s and used be an accountant in a university, but she quit to raise her daughter. She got divorced 12 years ago, she used to work in a store selling accessories and makeup products. She explained she had little income, the owner of the store refused to pay her on several occasions. When the owner thought something was missing or someone

shoplifted, she had to pay to compensate. She looked for other jobs but with no success. When I asked why she was insisting on working only in the first and last cars, she replied: “Because I want what I am doing to be *halal*, I don’t want to draw men’s attention, I don’t want men to hear my voice advertising shamelessly. I am my own boss, I work with women and for them. Can it be more *halal* than this? God forgives me. If it was not for these women-only cars I would have never started this job, and God knows there is nothing else I could do.”

Although Iranian women have occupied more than half of university seats, obtained higher education in engineering, art, medical science, law, pharmacy, social sciences, and asserted themselves as writers, directors, and thinkers, they don’t have their equal share in the job market due to systematic discrimination. In recent years with the rise of unemployment, women employees are experiencing a new wave of social pressure defining their primary roles to be good wives and mothers. By borrowing one of Prophet’s sayings “Paradise is laid down under the feet of mothers,” one banner installed in a square reads: “Paradise is laid down under the feet of mothers, not employees.”

Although in response to economic decline, Tehran metro train underground mobile market in women-only train cars is realized, established, shaped, marketed, negotiated and popularized by women. They have organized the most unorganized job market. They advertise for their items in most creative ways. The women whom I interviewed, despite all the hardship they experience, most of them took pride in “I am my own boss here.” In women-only train cars not only have they challenged legality, negotiated their legitimacy, broken rules, asserted their right to the space, but they have introduced new categories of market. Despite all their

achievements in acquiring necessary skills and university degrees, Iranian women's right to fair share of official job market has been denied. In the absence of bureaucracy and male job interviewers, they have claimed their fair share in an underground market in the most outstanding ways.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: A step forward to square one

If you are enjoying it, it's haram

> "Life is an end in itself. And if what being alive actually consists of is having powers- to run, jump, fight, fly through the air- then surely the exercise of such powers as an end in itself does not have to be explained either. It's just an extension of the same principle."
>
> David Graeber, from "What's the Point If We Can't Have Fun?" (2013)

There was this joke that our generation who were born after the Islamic revolution of 1979 often used to laugh at. The joke was that if you were ever wondering something is *haram* (forbidden or proscribed by Islamic exegeses) or not, the answer is simple: just ask yourself whether you are enjoying it or not—if the answer is yes then it's *haram*.

Ironically, there is some truth to this joke, at least from the point of view of state-aligned Islamic authorities, who encouraged grieving while frowning upon having fun as an act of immorality and waste. Many young Iranian men and women have faced severe punishments for enjoying themselves. Young Iranians who posted a video online of themselves dancing on a rooftop to Pharrell Williams' song "Happy" faced jail time and lashes. On state television, they were also forced to "confess" to their "wrongdoing" and to admit that they were "deceived" into making the video. On two other occasions, young Iranians were arrested for playing with water guns in a park on a hot summer day. It is as if happy Iranians unintentionally turn into the state's enemy.

When I first visited the women-only park, what caught my intention immediately was "the sound of fun," and it is becoming clearer for me why that was the case. I had never before seen a large number of Iranians, especially those who did know each other, and much less

women, having fun, so loudly, so visibly, as if they had nothing else to do at that moment. Having fun and joy were among the key terms recurring in my interviews when women described their experience.

On one of my visits to the women-only park, when I was leaving the park, I heard women clapping to music, and I was pretty sure someone must be dancing. I approached the circle of 20-25 women and made my way into the circle and saw two women dancing to a fast-paced Azerbaijani song. I joined the crowd and clapped to the two dancers. As a Lezginka dancer myself, I immediately recognized and appreciated one of the women's skilful moves. More women were joining the crowd, and two more women joined in the dancing. I saw some women pull out cellphones to record, although some other women advised them not to, as the dancers may get into trouble. Fariba, the dancer with skills, bowed to the crowed with a big smile and left the dancing group. I approached her and we talked. At some point I asked if she was worried if a recording of her dancing will get out, she replied: "I was not really thinking, it was fun." While we were talking two young girls approached us and asked Fariba if she offers dance lessons.

But why is the state against fun? Bayat (2013) argues that contrary to the general claims, the disruption of moral order is not necessarily at risk, what is at stake is the undermining of the hegemony, the regime of power on which certain types of moral and political authority rest. By pointing out Freud's conceptualization of Joke, he argues:

> Jokes bring pleasure and laughter because, according to Freud, they break the taboos and speak the unspeakable. Fun builds on the joy of immediate and instant pleasures

> rather than on those of distant and abstract referents such as the hereafter, the sacrosanct, and the untouchable—the very referents on which the authority of the doctrinal movements and regimes rests. (2013:91)

The women-only park is, above all, a place to have fun. “Having fun” and “It’s fun” were among the common phrases women used to describe their experiences and explain why they came to the park. One of the questions I used to ask my interviewees was to elaborate on having fun in the park. What was different about the kind of fun they could have here and why? The most common answers were “I don’t know,” “because everyone is happy.” Maybe these were not the kind of sophisticated answers I was looking for. But I realized later that I was asking the wrong questions. Why do they need to “elaborate” on the reasons they were having fun here? Well, because they just do have fun.

All those “rich children of Tehran” that have turned Tehran’s streets to a demonstration of a fashion show, are they driven by a feminist or opposition discourse, subtly resisting patriarchy or the state or Islam? Or are they driven by a consumerist culture and are conforming to “White” standards of beauty? They may explain their interest in fashion in a unique variety of motivations.

A feminist space vs. a feminine space

On one of my presentations on campus, I was asked about Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and how it can be related to my research. At the time, unfortunately I hadn’t heard of this festival so I could not elaborate on the matter. I became curious to know more about the festival as it was a women-only place. Zanjan’s women-only park and Michigan’s Womyn’s

Music Festival were established on radically different grounds, both geographically and socio-politically. MWMF was established and claimed by a certain feminist discourse and was built, managed, run, and attended exclusively by "womyn-born womyn."

In her ethnographic account of MWMF, Alexis Matza (2005) discusses how situated identities are embodied and performed through using this particular space. She observes that sexuality is celebrated through body reflexive practices, "using cloth, nudity, and temporary affiliation markers including haircuts, hickeys, and lesbian symbols, as semiotically rich markers of identity." She observes that differences are downplayed and shared identity of being womyn is emphasized and embraced. Womyn do enjoy being womyn. MWMF was closed after series of criticisms on the ground that it excludes (or phrased as "discriminated against") transgender women.

It is important to acknowledge that women-only parks in Iran were persuaded by reformist discourse, supported by medical reports, and generally opposed by conservative Islamic clerics, although at the same time they were ultimately established because proponents were able to define them as being in-line with the state's gender ideology. But women, both conservative and secular, claimed the space as their own. They enjoy their presence by dancing, laughing aloud, running and jogging, playing music, sharing their struggles and seeking help, having workshops and handicraft shops, all organized by women. Most women I interviewed stated that they would prefer these parks even if they were guaranteed safety and social acceptability to do the same activities in other parks. Farzaneh elaborated: "We should have both, safety in other parks and a women-only park, we have a different kind of fun here." The

fact that they experience this pleasure only in the absence of men through doing activities that have been restricted elsewhere may be understood as an internalized patriarchy. Regardless of the accuracy of such analysis, women realize their presence, articulate it and participate in women-only parks in positive terms. By attributing "false consciousness" to their own understandings, aren't we implying that we understand the complexities of life experiences and the self-realizations of women we study better than themselves? Aren't we imposing/prioritizing our own sense of reality over theirs?

Iranian women recognize and embrace their shared identity in the women-only park. Rather than doing so through nudity, they do so through whatever practices they can push for and enjoy, even if there are still some limits on these activities. For this very reason, these parks are under constant attack from conservatives (I have pointed out some examples in Chapter 2). Ali Entezari a pro-government male sociologist, maintains that:

> we must move in a direction to institutionalize hijab across the entire society. Women must be encouraged to observe hijab everywhere and under all circumstances in public. By providing space to experience removing their hijab, the parks create confusion among women and interfere in implementing the overarching objective of women observing hijab in public at all times. They serve more publicity and propaganda purposes. They harm more than they do any good.

Women are asserting themselves in many different ways. They are well aware of the opposing views regarding these parks. Can it be understood as a feminist goal, not in subverting patriarchy but in feminizing the space and taking pure pleasure in being a woman? Are we

curating women's stories—through selecting and shaping the kinds of stories that fit in our feminist goals—to narrate what we have already decided to narrate? I fell in the trap with the kind of questions I asked and the kind of observations I was looking for. Only in the process of transcribing my interviews did I realize that I was subtly doing that.

"Storyshop"; A neoliberal shop to curate stories

> "Lying at the confluence of actions and responses, they are identified not by their intrinsic attributes but by the memories they call up. Thus things are not classified like facts, or tabulated like data, but narrated like stories. And every place, as a gathering of things, is a knot of stories."
> Tim Ingold, From *Being Alive*

"Tell your story" is a motto of the storytelling boom in our contemporary society embracing individualistic values. Examples of these stories include moving stories of immigrants, refugees, Muslims, African Americans, Holocaust survivors, and dispossessed people who were "resilient," "hardworking," and "dreamers" who made to the top of their societies against all odds, like Michel Obama's "Becoming." These stories send a strong message to a society where we still hear phrases like "go back to your country," "go back to your kitchen," "Let's make America great **again**." But what is happening behind these stories? And what is the making of these stories?

In *Curated Stories*, Sujantha Fernandes (2017) discusses many ways in which these stories are doing harm not only to our understanding of the other "majority's" lived experiences of being a Muslim immigrant, or undocumented immigrant, but also these stories do harm to the people whom they claim to empower: "The binary form of identification available to these actors often required them to differentiate themselves from the majority of

undocumented, rural, anonymous peoples and African Americans, many of whom were stigmatized as terrorists or criminals." In other words, stories of "good" examples of immigrants, Muslims, etc. has been emphasised, which has further marginalized or stigmatized the majority whose stories do not fit into those categories.

These stories are also used to mobilize people during campaigning for elections, to have "insiders'" support to start wars or impose sanctions. These stories facilitate "pink-washing" the violence of war. Fernandes (2017) argues: "At a time growing concern about the role of the United States as a human rights violator and aggressor both domestically and abroad, the stories were also used to promote the image of the United States as a benefactor nation."

The Tale of Two Nazanins: A Teenager on Death Row in Iran and the Canadian Who Vowed to Save Her, by Nazanin Afshin-jam (2014), and *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran*, by Masih Alinejad (2018), are examples of curated stories in the context of Iran. Both authors have actively advocated for war and sanctions against Iran.

How does this neoliberal "Storyshop" relate to my project? In a sense I regard my discipline as a science that examines stories. My project has aimed to expose shortcomings of progressive politics in capturing complexity and multiplicity of lived experiences in a certain community and to contribute to more recent analytical approaches (such as Joseph Hill [2018], Lila Abu-Lughod [2013], Saba Mahmood [2005]) to study Muslim women's communities and to complicate our ways of understandings to approach other forms of being. Nageeb (2004) echoes the same sentiment: "We work with givens like norms, traditions, social relations, modes of social differentiation, and social order, but we also work with how these are framing

what is not yet a reality – that is, dreams and aspiration." We don't have such a thing as identical dreams. What does this very fact have to say and add to the possibilities of countless understandings of reality? It seems that acknowledging other forms of being and relating to the world, different meanings of what it means to be a woman is a necessary step to rethink feminist goals and projects.

Ingold (2011) argues for an alternative way to acquire knowledge not through "fitting the data of observation into the compartments of a received classification" but through moving around and knowing as we go, through "histories of wayfaring." As a promised goal of our discipline, doing so requires to move forward to square one, rethinking our ways of knowledge making.

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