

**The Perspectives of Iranian Feminists and Women
Activists on their Political Identity and Priorities**

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the perspectives of women involved in feminist and women's activism in Iran on important aspects of their political identity and priorities. This study draws on forty seven one to one semi-structured interviews with Iranian feminists and women activists, through an explanatory approach. It engages with the participants' perspectives on key concepts and issues such as feminism, women's rights, gender equality and democracy. Participants of this study include a spectrum of women with different beliefs and strategies: secular feminists, religious reformists and religious conservative women. As Iran is a country that has a difficult context for gender politics, Iranian feminists and women activists apply different approaches to seek to improve the status of women. Key findings include: (1) Approaches to being a feminist and supporting feminism relate both to participants' beliefs, but also the strategies they apply to advocate women's rights. (2) There were important differences and similarities in what participants understood by gender equality and what aspects of equality they prioritised. (3) Working towards greater democracy was important to all participants, but there were important differences in their views over whether democracy should be secular or Islamic and how far Iran was from being a 'full' democracy. This research contributes to the existing literature by considering a variety of feminists' and women activists' views about the terms feminist and feminism, their approaches to gain gender equality and also their views about democracy and its possibilities in Iran.

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Glossary

Aemmeh: A plural name of *Imam*.

Ahkam: Islamic and Quranic rules.

Ahlebeyt: The family of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Chador: A type of Islamic women's dress code comprising of a full-body cloak that covers a woman's hair and body, but revealing her face.

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence. While *Sharia* is defined as divine law, *Fiqh* is the human understanding of *Sharia*.

Fuqaha: An Islamic jurist who is an expert in Islamic law and *Fiqh*.

Hijab: Any hair and body covering which Islamic women wear in the presence of men to whom they are not related.

Ijtihad: The making of an independent verdict within Islamic law by independent reasoning and personal effort.

Imam: The name of an Islamic leadership position or the title of a mosque leader.

Khobregan Majlis: A group of experts who are able to dismiss *The Supreme Leader* of Iran. However, these experts need to be approved by *The Supreme Leader* in order to become members of the assembly.

Majlis: The Islamic Republic of Iran's equivalent to the British Parliament.

Mardom-salari-ye dini: Islamic or religious democracy.

Mojtahed: A qualified religious person who is an expert in Islam and has the authority to interpret the Quran.

Mojtahedin: A plural name of *Mojtahed*

Quessas: An Islamic word that means equal revenge, like the English expression 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'.

Shariah: Islamic law built upon moral code and religious law.

Shi'a: A strand of Islam whose followers believe that Ali (the Islamic prophet's son-in-law) is the first Islamic caliphate.

Special Court for Clerics: A court system for examining misbehaviour within the clerical establishment in Iran.

Tafsir: Inferring the meaning of the Quran.

The Guardian Council: A constitutionally-mandated 12-member council composed of six Islamic *faqihs* (experts in Islamic Law), and six jurists, specialising in different areas of law. The Council has considerable power and impacts upon the Islamic Republic of Iran as bills passed by the *Majlis* must be evaluated and approved by this Council to become law.

The Supreme Leader: a person who is the head of Iranian government and has the highest ranking religious and political authority in the Iranian state.

Ulama: People considered to be the guardians of legal and religious tradition in Islam.

Valie Faghih: The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, who is Khamenei (Supreme Leader) in today's Iran, to serve as *The Supreme Leader* of a country.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Research context

My motivation for conducting this research derives from my experiences as a mother and international student in the UK. Equally, my position as an Iranian woman who has suffered legal and cultural discrimination has always made me feel a second class citizen in my country, and so this was influential in directing my research. In this Introduction, to provide context to what I am exploring in the research, I will explain the gender inequalities which exist in different fields in Iran, and how feminists and women activists challenge these discriminations. Later, I move on to a brief review of the literature related to feminist and women's activism in Iran. Then, I will address the gap that this research attempts to fill, followed by the research aims, objectives and questions. Finally, I will draw the outline of the thesis.

Women in Iran experience varying degrees of discrimination and inequality across different fields such as law, family, economy, employment and culture. It can be seen that discrimination across these different areas mostly derives from legal and cultural inequality. In terms of legal inequality, there are a number of governmental state regulations that clearly differentiate women from men. One example is a religious tradition, enshrined in Iranian law, called *Quessas*,¹ whereby a woman's life is valued less than a man's in murder cases (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). In court, women's legal testimonies are valued less than a man's and, in some cases, worth nothing unless corroborated by a man (Hojati, 2015). Polygamy is also allowed in Iran, and divorce is legally only a right for men (Shirazi, 2012). According to Article 1117 of the Iranian Civil Code, a husband may deny his wife the right to work if he thinks that her job is incompatible with his or his wife's dignity or the interests of the family. In this context, Iranian women's labour force participation remains among the lowest rates in the world (Majbouri, 2016; Tohidi, 2016). This is in spite of the fact that, alongside reduced fertility rates in recent decades, there have also been increases in Iranian women's educational attainment. For example, in 1970 the average number of

¹ See glossary for this and all other specific Iranian terms used in this thesis. The terms in the glossary are italicised.

years spent in education for women aged 20 to 30 was 1.7 years; however, by 2010 this had increased to 10 years of education (Majbouri, 2016; Barro and Lee, 2013) This discrimination of women in employment and economy is mostly associated with the inequality in both the legal system and culture.

In terms of culture, gender stereotypes constrain women who choose to be in employment (Bahramitash, and Olmsted, 2014). For example, In Iran the association of men with being breadwinners and women as carers continues to be very influential in society. Such a gendered culture is an influential factor on the low level of women's participation in the workforce in Iran (Yousefy and Baratali, 2011; Bahramitash, and Olmsted, 2014). Another example of gendered culture that discriminates against women relates to divorce. A divorced woman in Iran faces challenges in respect to being accepted in society. This discouraging atmosphere may influence a woman's decision to remain in a life in which she is unhappy. These examples indicate how women are discriminated against in a variety of fields because of their gender, and show that circumstances are far from fair and equal.

From this quick glimpse into legal, social and cultural position of women in Iran, it is clear that they live in a secondary position to men. This information also tells us about some of the gender norms in Iran and the extent to which the state considers a Muslim woman as an obedient wife, daughter, or mother, whose main roles and duties lie within the private realm (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). In order to stand against these discriminations, feminists and women activists have taken on significant roles.

Reviewing the history of feminists and women activists in Iran reveals that they have been continually challenging the existing inequalities and seeking change via different types of activities, protests and efforts (Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). However, as Iran is an Islamic country in which religion plays an important role in regulating the cultural and political systems, feminists and women activists face many difficulties in relation to the religious and political issues involved with advocating women's rights. It is important to acknowledge that throughout Iranian history religion has always been one of the main sources of government regulation. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, religion was completely unified with the government and conservative religious leaders came to power (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). These political leaders do

not accept equality between men and women and their gendered policies have limited the activities of feminists and women activists. However, these limitations have varied due to the existence of distinct policies supported by different ruling parties, mainly reformists and conservatives. In Chapter Two, I will discuss the different gender policies of reformists and conservatives in further detail. Public visibility and the activities of feminists and women activists have varied depending on the gender politics of the ruling party. There are also other key factors related to women's identification and the strategies that influence their types of activities and visibility in the public realm.

In terms of the characteristics of feminists and women activists in Iran, most researchers have focused on the existence of two different categories of Iranian feminists and women's rights activists and their strategies: the secular, and the Islamic (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Mir Hosseini, 2011; Tohidi, 2016). Secular feminists are one type of feminist who challenge the impact Islamic beliefs have on women's rights. The strategy of secular feminists links to their idea that politics and religion should be separated from each other and, therefore, they challenge the impact of religion on women's lives (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). In contrast, Islamic feminists and women activists use religious texts as grounds for their activities to improve women's rights and question patriarchy (Badran, 2005; Mir Hosseini, 2006; Salem, 2013). They advocate the temporality of the explanations of the Islamic sources in order to adjust to modern situations (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). Islamic feminists and women activists challenge the patriarchal understanding of the Quran as based on male experiences, and thus they call for a reinterpretation of Islam in a more egalitarian and women friendly way (Mir Hosseini, 1996; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Mir Hosseini *et al.*, 2015).

The identity and strategies of Islamic feminists and women activists have enabled them to be more visible in the public sphere compared to secular women (discussed in Chapter Two). The activities of these Islamic women have taken place through two organisations and coalitions: namely reformist and Islamic. Notably, Islamic feminists and women's activities have not only been limited to women's organisations and NGOs (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Tahmasebi and Birgani, 2010); they have also had an

active role in publications and journals in respect to women's issues (Ahmadi, 2006). However, as they challenge the state's gender policies and call for change, not all of their activities have always been accepted by male politicians, particularly conservatives. I will discuss in Chapter Two how the visibility and activities of Islamic feminists and women activists in the public realm have fluctuated based on the ruling party. For example, women's activities in the public sphere were more invisible during the era of the conservative party, and instead the women continued their activities through virtual networks, websites and blogs (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Shirazi, 2012).

Secular feminists and women activists have been less active publicly compared to Islamic feminists and women activists in the public realm. These secular women have been more engaged in informal gatherings (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010), critical and feminist teachings/writings (Sedghi, 2007), and more importantly in the digital public sphere (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). Importantly, during the reformist time (1997- 2005) secular feminists and women activists participated in some women's NGOs due to the limited openings in society. These women, alongside religious reformist feminists and women activists, called for human rights (Tohidi, 2016) and the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. They also demanded legal modifications and women's legal equality (Mouri, 2010; Mouri and Batmanghelichi, 2015). I will also discuss in Chapter Five in detail how secular and religious reformist participants share the same concerns of inequality in different fields, including legal and cultural inequality, to improve women's rights.

Previous research has shown the challenges facing feminists and women activists seeking to improve women's rights in Iran. Many of the existing studies address the ways that the activities of feminists and women activists in Iran have been limited due to the discourse on the relationship between the 'West' and 'Islam' (e.g. Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Tohidi, 2016). Most of the literature about Iranian feminists and women activists also notice how being 'feminist' is problematic, particularly in the eyes of conservative religious political leaders, due to the assumption that 'feminists' are associated with the 'West' and therefore are not

applicable in Iran (Ahmadi, 2006; Mir Hosseini, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). The majority of the existing literature highlights the roles of Iranian feminists and women activists in improving gender equality (e.g. Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Mir Hosseini, 2012; Tohidi, 2016). In addition, in terms of the relationship between feminists and women activists on the one hand with democracy on the other, some of the literature has addressed the role of feminists and women activists in the democratic process (e.g. Moghadam, 2002; Mir Hosseini and Tapper, 2006; Afshar, 2016; Tohidi, 2016). Some studies have examined the strong association between women's rights and democratisation (e.g. Jahanshahrad, 2012; Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016; Moghissi, 2016). Some scholars have engaged with the role of reformist leaders on democracy and women's rights in Iran (e.g. Mir Hosseini, 2002; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). While such studies and knowledge are important to understand the social realities of feminists and women activists in Iran, they do not provide specific details about the strategies that feminists and women activists with different beliefs and approaches to improve women's rights. Women's strategies, such as the way they identify themselves, their priorities for women's rights and whether democracy should be secular or Islamic, have been overlooked in the literature. In the same vein, while the existing studies explain the characteristics of Islamic feminists and women activists, they are only concerned with religious reformist women and have neglected the voice and role of conservative women activists. Exploring the strategies and views of feminists and women activists with different beliefs concerning their political identities and priorities might influence academic understanding about feminists and women activists in Iran. It would do so by providing a more varied understanding of how different beliefs about religion shape political priorities amongst feminists and women activists. In addition, understanding feminists' and women activists' perspectives about feminisim, women's rights, gender equality and democracy is important, as this understanding contributes not only to the work of Iranian feminists and women activists but to policy makers as well. It can do so by suggesting new possibilities for collaboration between feminists and women activists of different viewpoints.

This thesis aims to fill the existing gaps in the literature on feminists and women activists in Iran by addressing feminist and women activist perspectives on what terms such as feminist, feminism, gender equality and democracy mean to them. Firstly, this

study explores participants' views across the spectrum of beliefs and strategies, including secular feminist, religious reformist and religious conservative women, on the terms feminist and feminism, and also examines their reasons for accepting or rejecting these terms. Although the existing studies (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Mir Hosseini, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Tohidi, 2016) have highlighted the extent to which the identity of feminists is problematic in Iran, they have failed to explore how feminists and women activists in Iran take different positions about being identified as feminist and supporters of feminism.

It is worth mentioning here that I use the terms feminists and women activists throughout this thesis and I am cautious about applying these terms. I used both terms even when reviewing the literature since only the term 'feminist' is used in these. It will be discussed in Chapter Two that most scholars do not differentiate 'feminists' and women activists in their work and they only use the term 'feminist' without paying attention to women advocates' preferences and self-identification. Therefore, this study explores the participants' views about the terms feminists and feminism. Moreover, the notion of activism is key to this study. Activism is a category that is defined in a variety of ways. The working definition of activism that I am using here is: different forms of engagement in the social and political sphere working towards social change in relation to a range of issues concerning women. Therefore, in this thesis some of the activists are feminist in their focus, some are, but do not use the language of feminism, and some explicitly do not approach their activism as feminist, but they all share an interest in women's position in society.

Secondly, this research explores the ways that feminists and women activists prioritise women's rights in Iran. The research to date has tended to focus on the attempt of Iranian feminists and women activists to gain gender equality rather than their priorities. This thesis examines how Iranian women holding different beliefs and strategies give priority to women's rights. Thirdly, the perspective of women about democracy is another focus of this study. As women suffer from many different forms of discriminations in Iran, democracy may be considered a good way to tackle this imbalance and discrimination. This thesis examines feminists' and women activists' views about democracy and the possible ways to reach democratisation.

This research is an empirical exploration of the political identity and priorities of feminists and women activists in Iran. To explore women's perspectives about women and feminist politics and their understandings of key issues, this thesis is an explanatory study. I draw from ideas within feminist research and methodology to help understand the nature of women's involvement in feminist political activity in different contexts.

Although there is little research focused on the activities of feminists and women activists in Iran, I attempt to cover and review the existing relevant literature. This strategy enabled me to maximise my understanding of the key concepts, for example feminists and gender equality, before collecting the empirical data. I used qualitative interviews to collect the data. A group of feminists and women activists with different beliefs and strategies was interviewed. I investigated the feelings, knowledge and arguments of Iranian feminists and women activists through in-depth interviews to achieve a better consideration of this research area. This thesis is important in the area of feminist studies because it gives a deeper insight into contemporary understanding of Iranian women who advocate women's rights. This study contributes by improving the understanding of feminists and women activists across a spectrum of beliefs and strategies in Iran, by researching the women's perspectives about feminists and feminism, gender equality and democracy.

Research questions, aims and objectives

The primary aim of this research is to explore the perspectives of women involved in feminist and women's activism in Iran on important aspects of their political identity and priorities. In order to reach this aim my key objective is to understand feminists' and women activists' perspectives on:

- 1) Feminists and feminism.
- 2) Gender equality and priorities of women's rights.
- 3) Democracy and its possibilities in Iran.

To achieve these objectives, I explore the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of feminists and women activists in Iran?
- How do they prioritise women's rights in Iran?
- What are the notions of gender equality among feminists and women activists?
- Does the conceptual space of democracy share the same meaning among feminists and women activists with different beliefs and strategies?

Chapter structure

The overall structure of the study takes the form of seven chapters, including three data chapters. Chapter Two begins by reviewing the literature around feminists and women activists in Iran, and looks at how women activists advocate women's rights in Iranian context. This chapter begins with the historical background and gender politics of Iran and moves on to explore the strategies that feminists and women activists use to improve women rights. In doing this, I examine the characteristics and strategies of secular and Islamic feminists and women activists, and their affiliations and achievements, alongside their views about gender equality. The final part of the literature review explores the discussion around feminists and women activists, religion, and democracy.

Chapter Three addresses the methodology and methods applied in this study. This chapter describes the process employed in conducting this research, including the research design and sampling process in three phases, followed by the design of the interview questions. This chapter also provides the detail of the ethical issues, interview process, and data analysis.

Chapter Four examines the views of interviewees on the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism'. I examine three major stands taken by participants in relation to the terms feminist and feminism. The chapter also analyses what is shaping the understanding of the women about what feminists and feminism means and why these women take different positions about it. Moreover, in this chapter the views and strategies of

participants to reach a fair society and their agreement and disagreements on adopting human rights to gain an egalitarian society will be explored.

Chapter Five examines how and why the participants understand and believe in gender equality and gender justice and also explores the different ways through which women give priority to certain rights, such as court testimony, polygamy, employment and the age of marriage for women. In addition, this chapter examines the respondents' views about both formal and informal inequalities, respectively existing in both the legal and cultural systems.

Chapter Six explores the participants' views about democracy and its relation to religious and gender issues. I examine whether democracy in the respondents' views is Islamic or secular and to what extent they believe that Iran is far from being a 'full' democracy. I also discuss the participants' views about the possibilities of democracy in Iran, including factors that can act as enablers to democracy or barriers to democratic process.

Chapter Seven is the concluding chapter, and it summarises the key findings. I explain how this research contributes to knowledge, and also discuss the similarities and differences of this research's findings with other studies. Finally, this chapter suggests some possible directions for future studies and outlines the limitations of this research.

CHAPTER TWO: Understanding Feminists and Women Activists in Iran

Introduction

This chapter presents previous research in order to understand how feminists and women activists in Iran advocate for women's rights. While there is limited literature on gender, feminism, and women's activism in Iran, in this chapter, I discuss the major empirical studies on Iran that are relevant to this thesis. Understanding the existing empirical work is important in terms of analysing the ways Iranian feminists and women activists express themselves, advocate women's rights, and define democracy. This chapter includes three main sections. Section one explores the history of Iran and its gender politics. Section Two describes strategies that feminists and women activists apply within the complexity of gender politics in Iran. It explores two different approaches: secular and Islamic feminists and women's rights activists. In addition, it explains the affiliations between these types of activists. Moreover, this section describes the ways that feminists and women activists seek change in Iran and the meaning of gender equality among them. Section Three explores the conceptions of democracy among secular and religious feminists and women activists.

Gender politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Extensive research has presented the difficulties and limitations that women have faced within the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Islamic Revolution (e.g. Mir-Hosseini, 1996; Tohidi, 2016). However, a small number of scholars have highlighted the positive influence of the Islamic Revolution on women, particularly Muslim women. In her earlier and recent studies about feminists and women activists in Iran Mir-Hosseini (1996) and Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2015) argued that the Islamic Revolution has catalysed the creation of an indigenous local feminist consciousness. She believed that Islamic feminists have been the 'unwanted child' of Islamic Republic (Mir-Hosseini, 2011: 71). However, the gender policies in Iran have varied since the Islamic Revolution. According to Tohidi (2016), there have been four significant eras since the revolution: the period of Islamic Revolution and Islamisation

(1979-1997); the period of pragmatism and reform (1997-2005); the conservative period (2005-2013) and the period of moderation (2013 – present). Across these 4 periods the position of women in Iran has remained problematic. However, there is specific time that reforms were happening and NGOs were growing. In the following sections, I will briefly discuss the gender policies and political trends of these four eras after the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Table 1: Timeline of four eras after the Islamic Revolution in Iran

	Leaders	Year	The Ruling Government	Gender Politics
First era	<p>Supreme leader:</p> <p>1) Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989)</p> <p>2) Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-present)</p> <p>Presidents: 1) Ali Khamenei (1981-1989). 2) Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997)</p>	1979-1997	The Islamic Revolution happened in 1979. There was not a particular group in power during this era.	The politics of this era is associated with discriminatory and strict conservative laws against women. For example, wearing the <i>Hijab</i> in public places became compulsory.
Second era	<p>Supreme Leaders:</p> <p>Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-present)</p> <p>President:</p> <p>Mohammad</p>	1997- 2005	Reformist government	Gender politics was less restrictive in terms of the relative freedom afforded to feminists and women activists. For example, the number of women’s NGOs increased during this era

	Khatami (1997-2005)			due to the relatively open social-political situation.
Third era	<p>Supreme Leaders: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-present)</p> <p>President: Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad (2005-2013)</p>	2005-2013	Conservative government	The politics of this era were particularly restrictive in terms of women's activities. For example, many women's NGOs closed.
Fourth era	<p>Supreme Leaders: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-present)</p> <p>President: Hassan Rouhani (2013-Present)</p>	2013-present	Moderation government	The gender politics is less restrictive than during the Third era; however, conservative politicians are still influential in limiting feminist and women's activities. For example, some of the women's NGOs have reopened during this time but their activities are constrained by conservative politicians.

Source: adapted from information provided by Tohidi (2016)

The political structure of Iran is not the same as multiparty democracies (Shuja, 2016). Iranian political parties are by and large loose formations of grouping. Parties tend to be considered in public debate as being either reformist, conservative or moderate in their approach to key aspects of how the state should be ruled. Reformist groups believe that they need to reform the structure of the state and these groups call for a reconciliation of democracy, human rights and Islam (Mir-Hosseini,2002). They

argue that Quran should be re-interpreted in accordance to the demand of time and place. Conservative groups block reformist groups and reject democracy. They believe that Islam should be ruled by Islam in a traditional way (Parsa, 2016). Conservatives advocate preservation of the Islamic government in its present form. Moderate groups are somewhere in the middle of conservative and reformist groups; but have more in common with reformist groups. In particular, they do advocate social and political change (Mllina, 2017). Reformist victory happened due to the support of moderate, reformist and some middle of the road conservatives (Farhi,2017). It is important to note that there are small groups who are associated with these three different umbrella categories only really become important during elections.

The first era, between 1979 and 1997, followed the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In October 1977, demonstrations were held against the Shah² and on 1st April, 1979, Iran became an Islamic republic; by December 1979, it was under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.³ After the revolution, Islamic traditions were given priority and there was a reversal of the modernisation processes that had been adopted in previous periods (Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015). Khomeini stated that the Islamic government would return dignity and actual social worth to women, and as a result religious women were one of the key participants in the Islamic revolution's demonstrations (Hoodfar and Laws, 1999).

The Islamic Republic during this period influenced the participation of Muslim women in the public sphere. For example, in Khomeini's decade (1979-1989) women could vote and run for parliament, and four women entered the parliament in 1980, although many of them in decision-making positions that were discharged or reduced in rank (Afshar, 1996; Esfandiari, 2010). Here, it should be mentioned that secular women were not permitted to participate in parliament or take part in any official political activity; only religious women were permitted.

² Mohammad Reza Shah was the last king of Iran from 1941 to 1979. Due to his advocacy of modernism, he lost support from the Iranian clergy.

³ See table 1, p: 11-12

This participation was important for religious women as during the period of modernisation before the Islamic Revolution, they were constrained to the private realm. The ideology of modernisation supported during the Shah's time (1960s-1970s) was before the Islamic Revolution. During this time, modernists claimed that women's exclusion from society, and especially from education, brought about a loss of economic and political power. They argued that women should take part in building the national economy (Paidar, 1997; Hoodfar, 1999). Modernists also suggested educating and rehabilitating women to be modern wives and mothers (Hoodfar, 1999). Many girls' schools were constructed and educated women had the opportunity to be employed as teachers (Paidar, 1997; Hoodfar, 1999). The Shah developed an educational system for women in order to forward the vehicle of modernization. While modernist ideology seemed to have improved women's position, only women, who did not wear the *Hijab*, had the opportunity to take part in the public realm. Women, who wore the *Hijab*, were unable to participate in employment opportunities or advanced segments of the economy. As Hoodfar (1999) argued, while many women wore the *Chador* and scarves in public, the veil was depicted as a symbol of 'backwardness' by the government. For this reason, religious women continued to feel alienated in society. On the other hand, women activists from upper class, secular backgrounds were elevated above religious women (Kia, 2005). These religious women were ignored by both women activists and the government, as religion was assumed to be regressive and a mark of traditionalist resistance to the Western-style modernisation of the time. However, after the Islamic Revolution this pattern of modernism changed and religious women started to work outside the home (Mir- Hosseini, 1996).

However, women's participation in the public sphere was the only advantage for Muslim individuals. Women lost many rights due to the changes to the laws after the Islamic Revolution (Karimi, 2014). Esfandiari (2010) points out that under Khomeini (1979 to 1989) the state suspended family protection laws concerning polygamy, divorce and legal age of marriage. There was no limitation on polygamy for men and they could also divorce their wives with simple declarations and retain custody of

their children without any problem. Conversely, women had no right to petition for a divorce and it became difficult for mothers to keep custody of their children. The legal marriage age was approved at nine years old for girls. Severe punishment, such as flogging and stoning, for crimes ranging from adultery to the breach of Islamic dress, were also approved in the parliament. Women were limited to traditional female roles during the Khomeini period (1979-1989). Overall, the female employment rate decreased and for those women who were employed they did not enjoy equal pay with men (Afshar, 1996). The closing of government nurseries resulted in difficulties for women to remain in their jobs (Esfandiari, 2010). Women were encouraged to consider their family and care responsibilities within their home as their first priority (Afshar, 1996). In this manner, governmental policies created conditions for women to stay at home and depend economically on their husbands or fathers. Moreover, forced *Hijab* and varying degrees of sex segregation have been in place since the Islamic Republic in areas such as education, employment and leisure spaces.

After Khomeini's death, the clergy within government divided into two different groups: reformists and conservatives. While reformist groups are associated with reform of religion and politics, and the relationship between the two, conservative groups are associated with maintaining religious orthodoxy and rejecting reform. These groups have different policies that have been put in place in relation to women's issues. Reformists are more flexible in relation to women's requests within educational and vocational facilities; in contrast, conservatives tend to limit women to the domestic sphere (Karimi, 2014). Although reformists and conservatives have variable degrees of flexibility, both parties refer to the Quran and religion to define women's rights. For example, the second era (1997-2005) happened during reformist time under President Khatami, and women enjoyed a growth in civil society organisations (Mouri and Batmanghelichi, 2015; Tohidi, 2016) and the feminist journals and other writings was relatively free of influence (Tohidi, 2016).

As a result of lobbying by feminists and women activists, Khatami employed a few women in major governmental posts. In 2000, during his presidency, the parliament

had thirteen female members who, unlike their predecessors, clearly declared their purpose to advocate women's rights and change the laws in favour of women (Bahramitash, 2007; Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016). Moreover, during Khatami's presidency, women enjoyed some modifications of the family protection laws. For some women whose husbands divorced them for reasons that were not their fault, the law awarded them monetary compensation. Women's age of marriage was raised to 13 and the prohibition for single women who wanted to continue education abroad on a government scholarship was revoked (Esfandiari, 2010). These changes are part of a long, turbulent history for Iranian women, who have experienced a variety of inequalities.

During the era of reformists, the social-political situation was relatively open (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Mouri and Batmanghelichi, 2015; Tohidi, 2016). For example, the number of women's NGOs increased from 49 in 1997 to 248 in 2001 (Paidar, 2001). In 2002, many feminist activists gathered to celebrate International Women's Day in Tehran. They protested about family law and demanded the elimination of unfair rules against women (Mouri, 2010). Before the presidential election in 2005, secular and religious feminists and women activists from different ideologies demonstrated in the streets and declared their opposition in relation to women's rights (Mouri, 2010). They argued that the system's fundamental, legal structure impeded the possibility of fulfilling women's complete rights as well as a significant democracy (Bahramitash, 2003). Several meetings took place among both secular and religious feminists to discuss strategies for contesting discrimination. They prepared a declaration that demanded a change in such discriminatory laws (Mouri, 2010).

However, the activities of feminists and women activists were limited following the change of president. In the third era (2005-2013), women experienced severe pressure and they faced policies that restricted women's rights during the conservative period under President Ahmadi Nejad (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Mouri, 2010; Karimi, 2014; Tohidi, 2016). Between 2005 and 2009, the police had strict orders to curb breaches of the dress code for women (Esfandiari, 2010). Again, in 2006, large numbers of

women, both secular and religious, demonstrated in Tehran to reiterate their demands relating to discriminatory laws. However, they faced severe opposition and treatment from the police (Mouri, 2010). The civil society organisations and media were under repression, including the women activist press and women rights NGOs (Mouri and Batmanghelichi, 2015).

Before the 2009 election, secular and Islamic feminists and women activists presented two main requests to the presidential candidates. The first was that the state should sign the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The second demand was that the constitution be modified in order to create women's legal equality. Feminist activists established websites and wrote articles to present their point of view and ensure people heard their requests. However, many of them were arrested and sentenced to a considerable period of imprisonment (Mouri, 2010; Mouri and Batmanghelichi, 2015).

The fourth era is the moderation period that began in 2013 and continues in the present day. During this time, while some women NGOs reactivated and political prisoners including feminists and women activists were released, the attempts toward improving women rights has again been limited by conservative groups (Tohidi, 2016). For example, President Rouhani asserted that his failure to appoint women ministers was due to the particular conditions of the country (Nandi, 2015) related to the sensitivity of conservative groups about women's issues. Women were marginalised from key decision-making positions in the parliaments (Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016). Instead, he advised other ministers to employ more women in their sections (Nandi, 2015). Rouhani appointed a woman activist as a vice president in 'women and family affairs' and this has been the most encouraging appointment. Generally speaking, so far, despite Rouhani's attempts to move toward some openness in the society, there has been very little progress on women's rights. For example, while there has been a reactivation of some women's press and NGOs, they are still under constant pressure and receive threats from conservative politicians (Tohidi, 2016).

All of the above examples suggest how gender politics has varied due to the policies of different strands: reformist, conservative, and moderate leaders. One might ask why, if reformist, and to a lesser extent, moderate leaders have had flexible gender politics, discriminatory laws were not removed during these times. It should be mentioned here that Iran has a particular structure that limits reformist activities. Iran has a *Supreme Leader*, who is also a religious leader, and is the most powerful figure in the country (Golkar, 2016; Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016). *The Supreme Leader* supports conservative views, which means the conservative position has the upper hand over reformist and moderate presidents. Moreover, there are some institutions such as *The Guardian Council* that are under the control of conservatives. This Council influences decisions made by parliament, and the role of this conservative group is to ensure that the drafts that pass to the parliament are not in conflict with Islam (Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016). Additionally, *The Guardian Council* can qualify/disqualify members of parliaments and candidates for presidency. For example, during the reformist era, the conservatives considered Khatami's policies as 'creeping secularism' and *The Guardian Council* used its power to disqualify reformist candidates from the parliamentary election in 2004 (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). Consequently, the gender policies of reformists and moderate advocates are and have been limited and controlled by conservatives. The complexity of the Iranian structure has resulted in problematic gender politics in Iran, but with some fluctuations. The following section will discuss the position of feminists/feminism within this context of gender politics.

Feminists/feminism and Iranian gender politics

Many feminist researchers argue that the needs of women differed in relation to the intersections between gender, region, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and race (e.g. Richardson, 1993; Werbner and Davis, 1999; Young, 2011; McLaughlin, 2014). In the same vein, contemporary feminists have questioned some feminists in the past because of their focus on a particular identity, that of the white, young and highly educated middle class (Krolokke and Sorensen, 2006; Robinson and Richardson, 2015). The argument of contemporary feminists is based on the recognition of intersectionality, different experiences of women and deconstructing categorical

thinking (Krolokke and Sorensen, 2006; Robinson and Richardson, 2015). These ideas are important for this study as they suggest that feminists' and women activists' needs, demand and strategies should be seen within their own context.

Being feminists and women activists in a Muslim country is more problematic than in a Western country. Due to the existing assumption within these countries that associate feminists and feminism with the 'West', feminists and women activists in Islamic societies face many difficulties to advocate for women's rights. There is a wide consensus among researchers of Muslim contexts about how women in Islamic societies are affected by the relation between the 'West' and 'Islam' (e.g. Ahmed, 1992; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). Women in Islamic countries need to carry much of the ideological weight engaged with culture and tradition as they are considered as guardians of the culture (Ahmed, 1992; Ahmadi, 2006; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). Understanding the association between the 'West' in a Muslim country, particularly in a political leader's views, is significant for this study as it helps to explain what challenges feminists and women activists face in Iran and how they propose their demands within their context.

In Iran being a feminist and/or supporting feminism is problematic, particularly within the political system, due to their association with the West (Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). Conservative leaders portray women activists and particularly feminists as harmful individuals under Western influence. They react to feminists and women rights' activists who advocate equal rights with arrests, negative propaganda, smear campaigns and imprisonment (Tohidi, 2016). Therefore, Iranian women need to adjust their demands in accordance with their community. As Mir-Hosseini (2006: 639) argues, '[c]ontemporary Western feminists could criticize the patriarchal elements of their own cultures and religions in the name of modernity, liberalism, and democracy, but Muslims could not draw on these external ideologies or on internal political ideologies in their fight for equal rights'. In fact, the association between feminism and the West appears to be damaging to the involvement of Iranian women in the call for gender equality.

As discussed earlier, the Islamic Republic of Iran was formed by a popular revolution to replace what was perceived as the tyrannical, secular and ‘Western’ rule of the Shah. Therefore, after the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader, limited the existing gender laws by claiming that they were Western and un-Islamic (Mojab, 2001). This suggests that being feminist in Iran is highly sensitive politically, in particular in conservative political leaders’ views, not only because of the relation between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ but also because the Iranian political system is based on religion. There is a wide consensus among Iranian feminist researchers about the sensitivity of the Iranian state relating to ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’ (e.g. Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). For example, Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2006: 1489-1490) argue:

Nowhere is this issue more prominent than in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the regime enforced a strict dress code for women, ostensibly to defend Islamic values. The regime accused Western powers (the colonial masters of yesteryear) of trying to undermine Muslim societies by corrupting their women. [...] Protecting Muslim women from Western influences, therefore, is an essential tenet for Islamists. The urgency in distancing Muslim women from Western values presents profound questions regarding the extent to which Muslim women can and should draw on Western feminism and its guiding principles.

From the above quotation, Barlow and Akbarzadeh appear to suggest how conservative political leaders’ argument about distancing from Western values confined Iranian women activists when advocating women’s rights. They have had to avoid being labelled as feminist. In another example of research on Iranian women activists, Tohidi (2016) notes that political leaders, mostly conservatives, in Iran have accused Iranian feminists and women aspiring to achieve equal rights of following ‘Western’ women. While most studies about feminists and women activists in Iran have focused on the pressure on women’s rights activists in Iran from the state, due to links with feminism, few studies have examined the positions that activists take related to the term feminism and how they apply this term. The majority of studies identify all women activists in Iran as ‘feminist’. For example, Ahmadi (2006), in her study, ‘Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context’ states that she uses the label Islamic feminist in Iran, whether they identify themselves as Islamic

feminists or not. However, a few Iranian authors (e.g. Afshar, 1996; Tohidi, 2016) whose work is about women activists in Iran, are cautious in applying the term feminist. They try to avoid labelling every women activist in Iran as feminist. Instead, they use both ‘feminists and women activists’ as terms in their writing, to give room to those women activists who distance themselves from the term ‘feminist’. Mojab (2001:130) is almost unique in her critique of authors who use the term Islamic feminism to refer to the activism of Muslim women advocating women’s rights within the framework of Islam in Iran:

Muslim activists themselves do not use the term. The Islamic women’s press, as an example, is generally hostile to western feminism. For instance, the semi-official, popular weekly *Zan-e Ruz* (Today’s Woman) rejects feminism as a western, anti-Islamic phenomenon while the more moderate quarterly, *Farzaneh: Journal of Women’s Studies and Research*, is less anti-feminist but avoids any identification with it.

While Mojab correctly highlights the importance of the self-identification of women, she fails to elaborate it further and explore how women deal with stigmatisation around the term ‘feminist’. Moreover, she strongly states that ‘Muslim activists themselves do not use the term’, thus closing the possibility of considering the distinct positions that Muslim women’s rights activists might take to different positions on whether to accept the term feminist. In this research, I avoid labelling women activists as feminist due to the problematic issues around it. Instead, the women’s self-definitions are considered for conducting this study. In the following section, I move on to discuss different ways that women tackle the problematic social position of women in Iran.

Iranian feminists and women activists: strategies, characteristics, seeking change and gender equality

While feminists and women activists have faced lots of difficulties to advocate women’s rights due to the sensitivity of the feminist label in Iran, they have attempted to create some strategies to improve women’s rights. In the same vein, in other Muslim societies, feminists and women activists have applied certain strategies to advocate women rights. For example, a well-known Moroccan Muslim feminist,

Fatema Mernissi, shifted her approach from advocating a secular reconstruction of Muslim society to Islamic reformism (e.g. Mernissi, 1991). This happened because of the history of Morocco and its experiences with secularism and modernisation. Mernissi (1987) advocated secular feminism; however, due to the experience of Morocco following a secular process (by the late 1970s and early 1980s), she had changed her position and proposed a reformist approach for feminist activists. The example of Mernissi suggests how women's activities are intertwined with the social, political and economic context (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006).

Many Iranian feminist authors place emphasis on different strategies that enable Iranian women to pursue empowerment and transformation. For example, Tohidi (2016: 85) stated that Iranian women activists:

have entered into a strategic engagement not only with the civil society at large, but also with some members of the ruling elite. They engage the political reformers inside and outside the government, the intelligentsia, the media, the law and lawmakers in the parliament, the clerics, various social institutions, and ordinary people. This engagement takes various forms and tactics, constructive criticisms within as well as outside of the framework of the existing laws and Islamic sharia toward revision, reinterpretation, and reform as well as deconstruction and subversion.

One of the key strategies that some feminists and women activists might take is defending women's rights in the framework of religion. This strategy enables them to achieve a wide acceptance among society, particularly political leaders, in order to bring about social change. This approach might even be applied by individuals who avoid basing their ideas on Islam. Therefore, women in Islamic countries might need to present their ideas in a way that is compatible with Islam (Ali, 2015). As Sedghi (2007: 247) argues there are two different groups of Islamic women who 'support' the Islamic approach:

devout Muslims and trespassers who have crossed the boundaries between religious and secular women with regard to women's positions and gender relations.

Her quotation suggests that in order to defend women's rights, women activists adopt some strategies such as an Islamic approach to improve women's rights. Moreover, Tohidi (2016: 77) notes that Iranian women's rights activists have been attempting to 'assure their community of their moral virtue, loyalty, and patriotism'. Women tried to prove to the ruling authorities in Iran that not only are their activities indigenous, their advocacy for equal rights is also not incompatible with a progressive interpretation of the Quran (Tohidi, 2016). The importance of indigenous women activists who could effectively challenge patriarchy has been highlighted by most existing feminist writers (e.g. Moghadam, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015; Tohidi, 2016).

However, not all women activists take the strategy of working in an Islamic framework. Based on the Islamic/non-Islamic approach that women take in Iran, they have been divided into two main categories by the existing literature. The following section explains how Iranian women engage with women's rights using different approaches.

Islamic and secular feminists and women activists in Iran

In order to understand the strategies that feminists and women activists take in the Iranian context, it is important to discuss existing categories of women activists in Iran and their strategies to improve women's rights. As Povey (2001) argues, Iranian feminists and women activists are categorised as secular and Islamic according to their position under the Islamic State of Iran. It is almost impossible inside and outside the Islamic Republic not to be involved in the debate about secular and Islamic feminists and women activists. A wealth of attention, among studies about Iranian feminists and women activists, has been given to the existence of two different categories of Iranian women's rights activists: secular and Islamic (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Tohidi, 2016). It should be mentioned here the term 'Islamic feminists', in the existing literature, only refers to women who maintain religious reformist viewpoints. However, one of the aims of this study is to unpack the category that is used by these studies. In this thesis, the category 'religious women'

includes both religious conservative and religious reformist women, including Islamic feminists and religious women's rights activists.

As discussed earlier, the notion of activism is key to this study. The definition of activism that is used here focuses on practices of struggling for change (Cammaerts, 2007) concerning women's position in the society. I am looking at activists who apply a variety of strategies in order to transform or reform society. Activism can be aimed at fundamental changes to the political system and social structures of society (Wallerstein, 1990). Other forms of activism are more reformist in approach (e.g. Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994), concentrated on social and political change that can lead to the extension of existing rights within the existing social order (Cammaerts, 2007). In this thesis, I am examining both forms of activism – revolutionary and reformist as both approaches to activism are present in the Iranian context.

In non-Western research (e.g. Ahmadi; 2006; Badran, 2009 ; Nurmila ,2009; Rahman, 2017) looking at feminist activism in the Iranian context, reformist approaches are associated with gender consciousness raising and action for social change. This form of feminist activism emerges from an awareness that women are subordinated to men and activism is needed to take action to eliminate this discrimination. For example, Mir-Hosseini (2011) argued that feminist activists share a general concern with women's issues and an awareness of gender discrimination at home and society and action to change women's situation. Iranian Islamic feminists are positioned within this reformist approach, but work within the framework of Islam and reinterpretations of the Quran (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Tohidi, 2016). In contrast secular feminists, are positioned as more revolutionary in approach due to their demand that there is a separation of religion and women's rights (e.g. Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010).

In this study I apply the term of 'activism' in a wide sense that includes feminists and women activists who engage with activism and social change differently and do not necessarily identify the problems relating to women in the same ways. However, they

are all interested in creating social change concerning women. As such, I work with a definition of activism that includes feminists and women activists whose concerns are women's position in society and seeking social change in a variety of degrees. What I also add to the work on activism in the Iranian context is also including the activism of conservative women. This is because these conservative women are reformist and are more aligned with activists who are reformist in approach. This illustrates that there is a continuum within these terms, not a simple binary of reformist/transformist, where along this continuum activists may be more/less reformist than those I characterise as reformist feminists above. These conservative women are also activists aimed at engaging with social change in relation to women; however, their analysis of the social field, the degree of social change they seek and approach is different from other feminists and women's rights activists (Schreiber, 2018). They are an important part of the landscape of activism focused on women's lives in Iran, so it is important to include their perspective and understand how they define and approach their activist activity. In the following section, I move on to the two approaches of Islamic and secular feminists and women activists discussed within the literature about women's rights issues in Iran.

Islamic feminists and women activists

Among Iranian authors, there are two opposing camps related to Islamic feminists and women activists. Most researchers (e.g. Najmabadi, 1998; Moghadam, 2002; Mir-Hosseni, 2017) have argued that Islamic feminists and women activists improve Iranian women's situation. However, a few researchers critique Islamic feminists (e.g. Kandiyoti, 1996; Moghissi, 1998; Mojab, 2001). Most of these academics and feminists treat Islamic feminism as a contradiction in terms. They have argued that Islamic feminists are inadequate forces to challenge patriarchy. For example, Mojab (2001) argued that radical legal reform is achieved through the separation of Islam and politics. She claims that defending the religion in Iran is the primary concern for religious individuals, and improving women's rights within the religious framework is problematic.

'Islamic feminism' emerged in Iran in the late twentieth century (Badran, 2005; Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006) as structuring of gender relations in line with orthodox interpretations of Quran caused increased difficulties for Iranian women (Mojab, 2001). As Mir-Hosseini (2006) argued, the emergence of reformist groups in the second era and their demand for re-interpretation of Quran to move toward democracy inspired Islamic feminists and women activists to call for more egalitarian reading of Islam. In other words, the approach of reformist groups stimulated Muslim women to question the gender bias in Islamic law in framework of religion. Earlier in the eyes of the state, women were only considered as mere objects of the laws; however, after the failure of the Islamic Republic to improve women's rights, Muslim women activists have claimed rights and actively participated in the process of reform and law-making (Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, this process has happened in line with the expansion of international feminism and women's NGOs in Iran which have influenced the development of women's rights within Islamists discourse (Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015). Islamic feminists and women activists emphasise that the understanding of the Quran has been based on men's experiences, male-centred questions, and the male-controlled societies in which they live (Mir-Hosseini, 1996; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015). In other words, they argue that patriarchy comes from men's interpretation of Islamic text. For example, one of the well-known authors of Islamic feminism in Iran, Mir-Hosseini (2006: 629) states:

Like most Iranian women, I strongly supported the 1978-79 revolution and believed in the justice of Islam; but when the Islamists strengthened their hold on power and made the sharia (or their interpretation of it) the law of the land, I found myself a second-class citizen. This brought the realization that there can be no justice for me, as a Muslim woman, as long as patriarchy is justified and upheld in the name of Islam. The prevailing interpretations of the sharia do not reflect the values and principles that I hold to be at the core of my faith.

The argument of Islamic feminists is on the basis that there is no one 'true' understanding of religion (Ahmadi, 2006). Islamic feminists and activists analyse the relations between the practice of power and production of knowledge by political-religious leaders (Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015) and apply religious texts as the grounds for their argument about patriarchy (Badran, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Salem, 2013).

Moreover, with regards to reinterpreting the Quran, Islamic feminists and women activists believe that as there are some texts in the Quran that reflect the authority of men, women have to consider the Quran's first audience, who lived in times of tribal Arab patriarchy (See for example, Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2015). In this manner, Iranian feminists and women activists avoid challenging the Quran, and apply religious text as the grounds for their argument about patriarchy (Badran, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Salem, 2013) and also examine the temporality of its explanations to adjust to modern situations (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). This position and strategy gives Muslim women activists more room to negotiate women's rights within an Islamic state, where conservative leaders are highly sensitive about upholding Islam in ruling the country. As Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2006) noted, the avoidance of placing the position of feminism as being in opposition to Islam allows Islamic feminists to be more influential than secular feminists in Muslim societies.

Muslim women in Iran have applied the same approach as early Western feminists who did not reject the Bible and their faith to improve women's rights (Mir Hosseini, 2006). Instead, they appeal to the 'higher' principles and values of religion. This approach helped these women to reconcile their faith and identity with the struggle for gender equality (Mir Hosseini, 2006) and, therefore, not be labelled as 'advocators of Western values'. In other words, Muslim feminists apply a strategy that has enabled them to work against the limitations placed on women rights within the framework of religion. Through these ways, these women can be closely tied to religious intellectualism in Islam (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). Any objection to the reinterpretation of the Quran leads to a defensible position for Muslim women, who face the problem of patriarchal interpretation, especially in Iran, where laws are approved in an Islamic framework; thus, the only way for Islamic feminists to address women's rights is to reinterpret the Quran.

Classic Islamic methodologies are the basic methodologies of Islamic feminism, that is, *Ijtihad* (autonomous investigation of religious sources) and *Tafsir* (clarification of the Quran) and interpretation of the sacred text with their own experiences and inquiries as women (Mir-Hosseini, 1996; Ahmadi, 2006). This methodology is not

Iranian Muslim women's rights activists' invention. As Ahmadi (2006) argued, first, male reformist leaders/politicians called for a reinterpretation of the Quran, and later women claimed this right through the process of reinterpretation. A considerable amount of literature has been published on Islamic feminist discussion of woman-centred re-readings of Islam's holy sources (e.g. Badran, 2002; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). These authors have stated that the involvement of women activists in the process of re-interpretation of the Quran closes the gap between the state's existing gender ideology and the reality of women's lives. However, these studies lack exploration of the limitations that Muslim women face with their involvement in this process. Moreover, most of these authors consider Islamic feminists and women activists as advocating the reform of religion. However, clearly not all Muslim women, for example conservative women, believe in reformist methodology and there are the distinctions between conservative and reformist (progressive) discourse among Muslim women activists. Conservative women argue that ordinances should be practised as they are defined within the Quran (in a traditional way) without any re-interpretation. Elaborating on this type of Muslim women's demands, i.e. conservatives, has been overlooked in studies related to Iranian feminists and Muslim women rights' activists. A small number of authors have mentioned the existence of this type of woman in Iran (e.g. Afary, 1997; Mojab, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006), and studies have failed to examine the characteristics of this type of women activist. In their study: 'Prospects for feminism in the Islamic republic of Iran' Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2008: 21-22) state:

both secular and religious-oriented Iranian feminists should be considered analytically distinct from conservative religious women [...] some conservative religious women in Iran are hiding behind the term Islamic feminism in order to conceal a fundamentalist view on women's status in Islam.

As the above quotation suggests, one key reason why conservative women activists have been overlooked within the literature is linked to the fundamentalist views these women hold. However, these conservative women exist in Iran and do have some activities related to women's rights.

Hoodfar and Sadr (2010) argue that Islamic women activists have had forms of activism through two important kinds of organisations and coalitions: women's

reform associations and Islamic women's organisations. The former includes feminists and women activists, who hold reformists' views, and often secular feminists and women activists. The latter relates to Islamist women's organisations seeking gradual change and includes religious conservative women. One of the most important of these Islamic organisations is called the Zeynab Society,⁴ which has more than 142 branches across Iran and has mobilised a number of women. The political strategy of their network has been to choose one women's issue at a time, lobbying political religious leaders as well as forming coalitions with other organisations across the country. Afshar (1996: 134) emphasised the roles of the Quango and non-governmental organisations as the most successful places for women to challenge women's rights and argued that 'although in the public domain success depended on espousing an Islamic stance, Islam itself is sufficiently flexible to allow a diversity of interpretation and much leeway for women'. Hoodfar and Sadr (2010) also mention how these Islamic organisations have enabled Muslim women to achieve law reforms, such as the martyr's widow's⁵ rights, in order to have custody of their children. However, despite their intention to elaborate the strategy of these women organisations in order to change laws, Hoodfar and Sadr failed to elaborate how these women defined gender justice and gender equality.⁶ Hoodfar and Sadr (2010: 897) only asserted that the members of Islamic organisations claimed that 'Islam sanctions equality between men and women'.

In contrast with the Islamist organisations, women's reform associations that mostly includes Islamic feminists and women activists, who hold reformist views, have attempted to keep their independence from the political structure and male parties and be more outspoken. They have argued that laws should be re-interpreted in a more women friendly way (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). These feminists and women activists,

⁴ For more information see: Mohammad Ali Zandi. '[Zeynab Society](#)' (in Persian). Baqir al-Ulum Research Institute. Retrieved 09/06/2018.

⁵ These women are those who lost their husband during the Iran-Iraq war. According to the law, women whose husband is dead or divorced women cannot have custody of their children: above seven years for daughters and two years for sons. However, an Islamic organisation gained this right for these women. .

⁶ For example, the Zeynab Society advocate the forced *Hijab*. See below:

<http://eaworldview.com/2013/07/iran-today-a-new-movement-for-womens-rights/>

who supported reformist views, also attained high ranking positions in NGOs during the second era (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010). For example, Khatami's advisors on women's affairs, NGOs, and also the Head of the Centre for Women and Family Affairs were women who advocated reformist views. As discussed earlier in this chapter, while Khatami supported civil society and women could participate in NGOs, this pattern reversed during the third era because of the restrictive gender policies Ahmadi Nejad implemented (ibid). Due to the closure of women's NGOs in Ahmadi Nejad's time, women's organisations continued their activities through virtual networks, websites and blogs (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Shirazi, 2012). The status of feminists and women activists has changed very little during Rouhani's presidency. While some NGOs have reactivated during this time, they remain under the control of the state and receive constant threats (Tohidi, 2016). Therefore, feminists and women activists have mainly continued their activities through virtual networks. Importantly, despite the attempt of the state to limit web-based activism, they have not yet fully controlled it (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Shirazi, 2012). Compared with other Iranian bloggers, women bloggers have been the leading bloggers in Iran. Additionally, the number of women internet users shows the highest internet penetration among Islamic societies in the Middle East (Shirazi, 2012). Having discussed the characteristics and strategies of Islamic feminists and women activists in Iran, I now move on to secular activists in Iran, and their approach to advocating women's rights.

Secular feminists

Early forms of 'secular feminism' emerged in the late nineteenth century in Iran (Badran, 2001). In the aftermath of the regressive laws implemented after the Islamic Revolution, such as compulsory *Hijab*, some secular feminists left the country (Sedghi, 2007; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). Secular women in and outside the country have been struggling to attain Iranian women's social and political rights. Ahmadi (2006: 34) assert, the importance of the role of secular women activists in Iran, with her argument that secular women's 'struggle has enormously contributed to the contest against the clergy's everyday attempts to marginalize women from social life,

impose the veil as a barrier separating women physically from men, and deprive women of their rights as citizens, mothers, and wives’.

Historically, secular national feminists have developed links with international feminism (Badran, 2001). This type of feminism draws on and is established by various discourses including humanitarian/human rights advocates, and of democracy (Badran, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). Secular-oriented feminism represents an alternative to feminist strategies based on Islamic sources. In fact, secular feminists view the problem of Iranian women’s rights as deriving from the relationship between Islam and politics. Unlike Islamic feminism, secular feminism is more concerned with the idea of the power structure of the Islamic state than with theology (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). As secular feminists advocate secularity, their idea is problematic in the views of political leaders who attempt to hold Islam as the foundation of laws.

The main strategy of secular women has been to publicise human rights abuses such as the low position of women in the family court, and the stoning of women, and in this way they have criticised religion’s ability to deliver gender equality (Sedghi, 2007; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). For example, Hoodfar and Sadr (2010: 898) state, ‘they have continued their activism through informal gatherings, and have tried to strengthen networking with Iranian expatriates and the transnational women’s movement, to pressure the regime’. In terms of the activities of secular women within Iranian society, Sedghi (2007: 250) states that ‘few continued their activism by engaging in critical and feminist teachings and writings...or engaged in public debates. Some became alienated at home’. Additionally, secular feminists and women activists used the limited opening space in the reformist time and managed to set up some women’s NGOs; however, these organisations did not call themselves ‘feminist organisations’. Similar to Islamic feminists and women activists, since Ahmadi Nejad’s time, secular women have continued their activities primarily online (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010).

While Iranian secular women have been struggling to improve women's rights, their attempts, although important, have sadly been inadequate to change the patriarchal structure of Iran. As conservative political leaders hold significant power over key state institutions, secular women have encountered barriers to being active within the framework of Islam (Ahmadi, 2006). Given these limitations on the activities of secular women, some scholars (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015) have highlighted the role of Muslim women activists as insider forces who attempt to reconstruct gender and Islamic discourses and try to re-interpret traditional Islamic and legal sources. However, analysis of the literature about secular and Islamic feminists and women activists (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015) suggests that, secular women activists can contribute to women's rights in different ways. Secular women can be considered an important factor due to their ideas about Iranian women, which act as a catalyst for further discussion in terms of women's rights amongst religious individuals, including women activists. However, religious reformist women activists are influential due to the strategies through which they call for women rights within the religious framework. As the religious structure is crucial within the existing system, it seems that they can play an important role in terms of practice. For example, as Ahmadi (2006) notes, the engagement of Islamic feminists with Islamic sources, the clerical scholars, and also the popularity of some women's rights activists' journals, have all had an influence on the religious discourse and encouraged conservative women to publish journals related to women. This suggests how secular and religious reformist and conservative women influence each other. In the following section, I examine how secular and Islamic feminists and women activists work together.

Affiliations between secular and Islamic feminists and women activists

As discussed earlier, secular feminists during the reformist time began writing more openly in the women's press that belonged to Islamic feminists and women activists. For example, *Zanan*,⁷ a magazine run by Islamic feminists and women activists, became a platform upon which both secular and Islamic feminists and women activists published their articles (Ahmadi, 2006). This enabled secular and religious

⁷ *Zanan* is the name of one of the most important and famous journals in Iran.

women activists to work together and engage in more direct communication. They have also been participating in women's reform associations (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). Notably as Hoodfar and Sadr (2010) argue the relationship between secular and Islamic feminists and women activists, who support reformist views, became stronger after the Green Movement. Due to the importance of this key event, I will briefly explain the Green Movement next.

The Green Movement took place in the third era after Ahmadi Nejad became president in 2009 through presidential elections. A mass group of Iranian people and voters demonstrated in the street and called for the removal of Ahmadi Nejad from the presidency. As Ahmadi Nejad belonged to conservative groups, individuals including reformist and secular women, questioned conservatives with the slogan 'where is my vote'? (Milani, 2010). The positions and alliances of reformist and conservative groups shifted after the 2009 elections. As a result of the 2009 election, coalition politics polarised into two different sides, reformists and conservatives, bringing about political paralysis in Iran (Kamrava, 2010). When Ahmadi Nejad won the election, many Iranian people protested by arguing that the votes were fraudulent, and called for Ahmadi Nejad's removal from the presidency. Due to this protest, some dissidents (who advocated for the reformist leaders) faced torture in prisons and arbitrary arrest (Kamrava, 2010). It is notable that the reformist leaders of this movement were, at the time of writing this thesis, still being held in prison. This protest is recognised as the largest event since Islamic Revolution of Iran and is called the Green Movement. Green was the symbol of the campaign of the reformist candidate (Mir-Hosseini Mousavi) for the 2009 presidential election.

As Mir- Hosseini (2011) states the Green Movement turned into a grassroots movement for civil rights. As during the Green Movement secular women supported reformist politicians, the relationship between secular and Islamic feminists and women activists was fortified. Moreover, after Ahmadi Nejad's presidency when women NGOs were closed, secular women along with religious reformist women started to use the digital public sphere as their platform. This strategy helps them to have a dialogue in virtual space (Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Shirazi, 2012). For

example, the Feminist School⁸ is a famous website on which both secular feminists and women activists published their articles.

Most literature related to Iranian Islamic and secular feminists and women activists place emphasis on the solidarity and collaboration between secular and Islamic feminists and women activists (e.g. Najmabadi, 1998; Badran, 2005; Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). In their study Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2015) argued that the conversation of Islam and Islamic feminism in terms of re-interpreting the Quran paves the way to go beyond dichotomies such as human rights versus Islam and religious versus secular feminists. Another scholar, Tohidi (2016) pointed to the connection between Islamic and secular feminists and women activists in Iran and argued that while currently in Iran there is intense repression both at the state and societal levels alongside the ideological separation and distinction in strategies among women activists, these activists have often converged in practice to achieve their common aims.

There are several overlapping reasons that partly explain why Iranian secular and Muslim feminists and women activists are able to work together. Firstly, the approach of Iranian Islamic women on re-reading religion has opened the door to secular debate and human rights, helping them to have a common aim. Secondly, the particular and flexible characteristics of Islamic women in Iran, which are different from other Islamic women in Islamic countries, influences their affiliation with secular women activists in Iran. Now, I explain these reasons in turn.

Within existing studies on the relation between Islamic and secular women, some writers (e.g. Afshar, 1996; Mir-Hosseini and Yamani, 1996; Najmabadi, 1998) believe that Iranian Islamic feminists apply the strategy of interpretation of the Quran which frees them from being confined to Islamic discourse. For example, Ahmadi (2006: 50) argues:

There is no doubt that Islamic feminists base their ideas and claims primarily on Islam and legitimize their activities with the help of the Islamic tradition. Yet, Islamic thought is not the only basis of Iranian Islamic feminists' ideas

⁸ For more information, see: <http://www.feministschool.com/english/>

and demands. So, what we are witnessing in Iran is not an Islamic feminism that only works from within the frame of Islam to reinterpret sacred texts and bring them in line with Muslim women's new demands in our time, but it is, as some studies show, a movement that attempts to constitute a new discourse of women, albeit on religious grounds, by working from both inside and outside the Islamic legal and theological discourses.

Muslim women activists have applied both the theories and methodologies of the secular and Islamic schools (e.g. Badran, 2002; Ahmadi, 2006) as Iranian Muslim women activists and Islamic feminists 'have opened up the domain of interpretation to nonbelievers and non-Muslims' (Ahmadi, 2006: 45).

Many researchers claim that both secular and religious reformist feminists and women activists call for human rights (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). For example, Tohidi (2016) argues that under the totalitarian state ideology, the liberal and social democratic human rights framework for intellectuals including women's rights activists, has come to be the common value for coalition building. In respect with the engagement of Muslim women with human rights Ali (2000) argues that while Islamic feminists and women activists do call for human rights, they do not express it explicitly. He states that Islamic feminists are unable to adopt a human rights framework, as within Muslim societies sovereignty rests with God alone, and secular laws are unacceptable. Instead, Islamic feminists and women activists must find a culturally appropriate equivalent of human rights in their own traditions and cultures (Ali, 2000). Engaging with human rights is one aspect of what this study is going to examine. It will be discussed in Chapter Four, how those women who consider the Muslim identity and faith as a part of politics engage with the question of human rights. Calling for a re-interpretation of Quran in line with human rights can be considered a key factor that helps secular and Islamic feminists and women activists to form affiliations. Notably, it is worth to mention here that the flexibility of Iranian Islamic feminists and women activists is also an important element influencing the coalitions of secular and Islamic women.

Islamic feminists and women activists in Iran have been seen to be more willing and open to engage with a broader sense of politics and challenge further the nature of state (see for example Mir-Hosseini, 1996; Najmabadi, 1998). This characteristic and approach of Islamic feminists and women activists has had a positive influence on their affiliations with other types of feminists, including Western feminists and secular feminists in Iran. Many researchers who focus on women's issues in Iran avoid highlighting the differences between Iranian feminists and women activists and Western feminism (e.g.Mojab, 2001; Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). Instead, these studies have stressed the affiliation between Islamic Iranian women's rights activists and feminists and Western feminists. For example, some scholars (e.g. Najmabadi, 1998; Ahmadi, 2006) have argued that Iranian Muslim feminists and women's rights activists have claimed, contrary to other Islamic feminists in other Muslim contexts, a connection with Western feminism. Ahmadi (2006: 33), focusing on the link between Iranian women activists and Western feminists, argued that:

Islamic feminists in Iran are rethinking gender in Islam. Not only are Islamic feminists opening the doors of interpretation of sacred texts and debates on women's issues to groups other than Muslims but they have also broken with the reactive gender conservatism and West phobia prevailing among fundamentalists, connected themselves with Western feminism, and woven new connections between Muslim women and Western feminism.

However, it should be noted that these connections might not be expressed *openly* by Iranian women activists, because, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the gender policies of Iran put pressure on Iranian feminists and women activists to distance themselves from the West and Western feminists.

Identity of Iranian feminists and women activists

There are several global, political, historical and social aspects that might influence the specific identity of Iranian women. Firstly, globalisation has had a significant influence on Iranian women's ideas about gender issues (Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015; Tohidi, 2016). While the ruling patriarchal authorities have attempted to keep Iran internationally insulated, women's rights activists are becoming more up-to-date

about the current leanings within global feminism, and more transnationally involved, particularly with U.N. conventions such as CEDAW. As Tohidi (2016: 76) argues:

[a]nother set of factors, of increased influence in more recent years, has to do with increased processes of globalisation and the international currency of the discourses of human/women's rights spreading through the United Nations (U.N.) and transnational feminist activism and new communication technology such as satellite television, the internet and social media. Increased globalisation has intensified a 'glocal' dialectic, meaning the interplay of the local-national factors with the global international factors.

Ahmadi (2006) also argues that Iranian women activists, including Islamic feminists, have been influenced by the process of globalisation, through which feminists struggle for equality and justice. For example, Iranian women activists have attended a variety of conferences, mainly sponsored by the U.N., since 1975. Engaging with globalised modern realities has motivated many Iranian women activists to rethink gender relations in Iran (Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016).

Additionally, another aspect of globalisation is linked to the roles of Iranian researchers and writers who are based in Western countries. As Tohidi (2016) notes, since the Islamic Revolution (1979), thousands of voluntary or forced Iranian immigrants mostly left Iran due to political reasons and settled in North America or Western Europe. Most of these Iranians include many accomplished professionals and highly educated persons devoted to the cause of democracy and human rights in Iran. In Tohidi's view, Iranian authors who live in Western countries play an important role in constructing the discussion around the ways that women's rights in Iran can be improved.

There is a dynamic of anti-West ideology that is an important political discourse and rhetoric within Iranian politics. However, because of the history of not being colonised, the strength of anti-West discourse amongst secular and Islamic feminists is not the same as other Islamic countries in different regions, with different histories. For example, in the Egyptian context, Badran (1996) explained how feminists connected with the nation's liberation and therefore they built up a united nationalist

front with men's liberal nationalism during the independence struggle in Egypt. As Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2006) state, while the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy was derived from Islam, the state followed the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) suggestions on social spending and investment. However, by the early 1980s this program resulted in devastating economic stagnation alongside political oppression. Therefore, modernisation models that were Western-informed became faltering and the Islamic response to the failure of the modernisation, similar to other Middle Eastern countries, was to decline the secular model and call for a return to Islam. These experiences within Morocco, had a considerable influence on the approach of Moroccan Muslim feminists, as they are intertwined with their social, political and economic context. As Badran (2002) and Ahmadi (2006) argued, many other feminists in Muslim societies have had similar nationalistic feelings which are interwoven with their Muslim identities. They argue that in most Muslim societies there is an assumption that the West, through colonialism, has attempted to undermine Islam and the cultures of the Arab world and replace them with Western beliefs. This explains why in the Arab world feminists and feminism are often discredited as agents of Western colonialism. However, Iran's case in some authors' views, is different, as Iran was never under Western colonial rule. Ahmadi (2006: 51-52) states:

Iranian people have not felt, therefore, any need to defend their 'Persian identity' against 'Western attack.' Still, Iranian national feelings have often stood against their Islamic identity. During those historical periods in which nationalism was emphasized, Islamic identity was weakened. Therefore, although the Islamic Revolution was indeed based on an anti-imperialistic driving force, many Iranians did not regard it as an anti-Western struggle to retain their national identity. Only religious fundamentalists regarded the Revolution as an attempt to preserve Islam from being undermined by Western values and ideas. In contrast, an important point of departure in Iranian Islamic feminists' struggle for equality has been the very presence of Western values and ideas.

Ahmadi (2006) claims that for Iranian women activists there is a link, in their real feeling, between themselves and Western feminists. Tohidi (2016) also argues that the affiliation of Iranian women activists with Western activists does not mean that feminists and women activists only follow Western feminists' demands; in Tohidi's (2016) views, all the international and national pulls and pushes resulted in the formation of the Iranian feminists and women's rights in the way that they have

maintained their independence and home-grown roots. In this thesis I want to explore where the concept of West does come in and where it does not. In the data chapters I will discuss how for some participants it matters, while for some it does not.

Feminists and women activists in Iran and seeking change

After discussing the collaboration of secular and Islamic feminists and women activists, the next question one might ask concerns the nature of the achievements of Iranian feminists and women activists and how they call for gender equality and gender justice in Iran.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the pathway of women's activism and feminist movements in Iran is complicated. In spite of the ruling conservative Islamists, who maintain many forms of practical and legal discrimination against women, as Tohidi (2016) mentions, the Iranian women's movement has in more recent years emerged as a lobbying, networking, framing, campaigning, collectively protesting, and mobilising force. The government's arrest and repression of feminists and women activists is significant as it suggests the resistance of Iranian activists who continue to challenge the position of women in Iran. For example, there are many examples of women being arrested for standing against the compulsory *Hijab*. Women's movements, in Tohidi's view (2016: 80) lack formal representations, and instead are 'segmentary' (have several, sometimes competing, organisations and groupings), 'polycentric' (have multiple and sometimes competing leaders), 'reticulate' (are linked to each other through a loose network). This suggests the limitations that the women's movement has faced and which influences their achievement of gender equality and improvement in the status of women in Iran. It is worth to mention here that this thesis is not a social movement theory and does not aim to establish whether in the past or the present there is a feminist/women movement or not. What this study explores is how participants with different beliefs give meaning to the variety of possibilities around contesting gender roles.

In terms of the achievements/successes of women activists in Iran, some of the literature (e.g. Afshar, 1996; Ahmadi, 2006; Afshar and Dennis, 2016; Tohidi, 2016) has argued that feminists and women activists have not achieved significant legal change. However, these authors emphasise that women activists are not disappointed and are still fighting against gender discrimination. For example, drawing on their analysis of the achievement of women activists in Iran, Ahmadi (2006) and Tohidi (2016) stressed that, while Iranian women activists have not markedly changed the legal discriminatory laws since the Islamic Revolution, they have had an active presence in public life. Despite the stress found in studies on the resistance of women activists in Iran, the ways in which feminists and women activists tackle their limitations have not been elaborated.

Additionally, in terms of examining women activists' achievements, most of the existing literature on feminists and women activists in Iran focuses particularly on legal change rather than cultural change (e.g. Afshar, 1996, Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2012; Shirazi, 2012; Afshar and Dennis, 2016). One of the few examples is Afshar (1996) who asserted that Iranian women who participated in the political sphere have suffered from male expectations within the political realm, and needed to be cautious about the extent to which they advocate women's rights to change discriminatory laws. Despite the attention paid by Afshar (1996) to debate around cultural change, she failed to elaborate this point further. Mojab (2001) also mentions cultural change; however, she claims that Iranian feminists and women activists struggle for formal equality and do not focus on cultural inequalities existing in culture. This idea suggests that legal equality is the primary concern of Islamic feminists rather than cultural equality. In contrast, in Chapters Five and Six, I will examine the importance of cultural inequality/change to participants to both reaching gender equality and democracy. The concept of cultural inequality adopted in this research relates to the cultural beliefs and values that discriminate women. These cultural norms normalise the existing gender roles and are an obstacle to women being viewed as equal to men. For example, the influence of cultural norms of the importance of women's role in providing care within the home limits their opportunities for and access to education and employment.

In the Western context, in terms of the association between gender equality and cultural inequality, some authors argue that citizenship is not only about legal equality, but also cultural equality (e.g. Pakulski, 1997; Richardson, 1998). These scholars, in contrast with many Iranian researchers, consider both the formal inclusion of all members of society alongside the informal obstacles which sustain exclusion. These differences may be partly explained by the existence of many basic discriminatory laws in Iran that encourage the Iranian authors to focus on the legal system. In the same vein, the concept of gender equality and justice is much wider, and more detailed within the Western concept, compared with Iranian scholars.

The debate of gender equality and gender justice

In the Western context, there is a wealth of literature associated with the concept of gender equality and justice. For example, writers debate whether women's equality should be reached through a focus on difference or sameness (Walby, 2005). In terms of equality based on sameness Brown (2006: 36) states: 'Liberal equality is premised upon sameness; it consists in our being regarded as the same or seen in terms of our sameness by the state, and hence being treated in the same way by the law'. However, the concept of gender equality, how Iranian feminists and women activists define equality has not been explored among scholars whose work is concerned with Iranian feminists and women activists (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010; Tohidi, 2016). While the existing literature about Iran applies gender equality in a general way, in Chapter Five, it will be discussed how gender equality is understood differently among participants to show that it is more complex than the existing literature implies. One of the key reasons that might justify the lack of competing meanings of gender equality among scholars may relate to the particular concept of justice existing within Islamic debate.

The meaning of gender justice for traditionalist Muslims drives from a notion of justice existing in the Quran (Kadivar, 2013). A few non-Western researchers for example, Kadivar (2013), Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2013), Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2015) and

Duderija (2017) note that the meaning of justice in a traditional way is based on discriminatory laws. In traditional Islam, gender justice means that everything is in its proper place and as men and women have their own essential places in the society and family, ‘justice consists of keeping them in these places and giving them rights accordingly’ (Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015: 36). This definition of justice justifies and reproduces the gender stereotype that men are stronger and therefore have superior rights (Eshkevari, 2013; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2013; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015). This traditional meaning of ‘justice’ clearly leads to gender inequality in many areas, including the gender division of work in Iran. For example, Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam (2011:422) state, ‘only 3.5 million women have paid work in Iran compared with 23.5 million men’.

In contrast with the definition of ‘justice’ in Islamic discourse, analysis of the studies about Iranian feminists and women activists illustrates that gender equality and gender justice for these researchers is mostly associated with human rights and gender neutral laws. As the particular meaning of ‘justice’ within traditional religious discourse has the potential to lead gender discrimination, Iranian authors might apply gender equality in line with human rights and gender neutral laws to distance themselves from the particular meaning of justice in religious discourse (Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015). As gender equality and women’s rights are strongly associated with democracy, in the next section I describe the literature relating to Iranian women, Islam, and democracy.

Women, religion and democracy in Iran

Despite some democratic features in Iran, women are denied basic political and social rights (Parsa, 2016). Most studies related to feminism and democracy in Iran have only been carried out in a small number of overlapping areas. Some researchers have mentioned the ways that Iranian women activists contribute to democratisation by improving women’s rights (e.g. Afshar, 1996; Moghadam, 2002; Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). These studies point to women’s efforts for gender equality and, consequently, democracy. Additionally, some studies have examined the

strong association between women's rights and a democratic system (e.g. Jahanshahrad, 2012; Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016; Moghissi, 2016). Some scholars have engaged with the positive role of reformist leaders, mainly Khatami, who supported democracy and human rights on improvement of women's rights in Iran (e.g. Mir-Hosseini, 2002; Hoodfar and Sadr, 2010). For example, they examine how, during the reformist time (second era), feminists and women activists enjoyed relative freedom of the press and expression and NGOs grew (e.g. Paidar, 2001; Rostami-Povey, 2013). However, considering the alleged important role of women activists in the process of democratisation, there is hardly any research on the concept of democracy as seen by feminists and women activists.

As Iranian laws are based on Islam, in order to examine the conception of democracy among women activists in Iran, it is worth looking at the existing literature related to democracy and Islam. There is a wealth of literature on democracy in Muslim societies and the relative importance of religion is debated (e.g. Huntington 1993; Rowley and Smith, 2009; Collins and Owen, 2012; Potrafke, 2012). Due to the fact that this study explores the conception of democracy among feminists and women activists, reviewing the literature is significant in realising the models of democracies and their characteristics as proposed by these scholars.

Some scholars such as Gellner (1983), Huntington (1993), Rowley and Smith (2009), Potrafke (2012) and Tezcür *et al.* (2012) argue that there is a significantly negative correlation between democracy and Islam. For example, from Rowley and Smith's perspective (2009), Muslim countries are less likely to be democratic because public opinion in these countries is less favourable to freedom, due to the boundaries of religion. Rowley and Smith (2009: 296) state: 'strict enforcement of homogeneity in one sphere, religion, is likely to be prejudicial to the development of free debate in another sphere, democratic politics'. Tezcür *et al.* (2012) considers Iran to be a country which has a negative relationship between religiosity and democracy, and a positive relationship between dissatisfaction with the regime and democracy. His

survey illustrated that Iranian individuals critical of the ruling ideology, and less religious, are demonstrated to be more supportive of democracy.

However, other scholars such as Karatnycky (2002), Tessler (2002) and Collins and Owen (2012) refuse to accept these associations, arguing that the link between Muslim societies and democracy is more complicated. The negative association between oil and democracy in the Middle East has been highlighted by some scholars (See Ross, 2001; Karatnycky, 2002; Herb, 2005; Ahmadov, 2014). For example, in his study, Karatnycky (2002), in spite of showing a democratic gap between non-Islamic countries and Islamic countries, disagrees with the notion that Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy, and instead points out that there is a negative relationship between natural resource wealth, such as oil and gas, and democracy in the Arab core of the Islamic world. In this respect, Ross (2001), who is a prominent author discussing the association between oil resource and democracy, argues that there are several reasons for the negative effect of oil on democracy. Firstly, it relates to the state's policies, as the state uses low tax rates alongside spending huge amounts of money to dampen forces for democracy. By keeping the finances hidden, autocratic states empower their governments and remain undemocratic (Ross, 2011). Secondly, there are internal and governmental forces that are created by the state in order to repress democratisation. Thirdly, in oil-rich societies, it is less likely that industry and service sectors will improve and thus the failure to move in to modernization has a negative impact on the process of democracy (Ross, 2001). Therefore, for researchers such as Ross, it is oil rather than religion which is playing the key role in limiting the scope of democracy in countries such as Iran.

From a different angle, Collins and Owen (2012) critique the idea that Islam is incompatible with democracy. Instead, they distinguish between secular democracy and Islamic democracy, as the former has been ideally defined in Western liberal theory, and the latter is a religiously-oriented democracy advocated by many Muslim activists and theories. By regarding Islamic democracy as a type of democracy, they show that religiosity affects the choice of Islamic democracy over secular democracy.

Therefore, Islamic democracy is more in line with the views of religious people, who see this kind of democracy as protecting their values. For example, in case of Iran, Islamic democracy, for religious individuals, is considered as a system through which the president and members of parliaments are elected by Iranian people. However, these representatives should submit the bills in framework of Islam. There are some institutions in Iran, such as *The Guardian Council*, whose role is to supervise that legislations passed by parliament are in accordance with the Quran.

Collins and Owen (2012) argue that liberal theorists advocated secularism as essential to democracy and seek to remove religion from the public sphere and maintain neutrality towards all kinds of religions. These characterisations of secular democracy are critiqued by Muslim individuals in Islamic societies, leading them to regard Islamic democracy as preferable alternative to it. Collins and Owen (2012) discuss how religious people disagree with liberal democracy and they claim that this type of democracy is incompatible with religious laws.

In the process of democracy, there are two distinct concerns: one is that the individual's values are identified in the political culture, and the other is the democratic institutions and processes. There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of political cultures that include the beliefs and values of ordinary citizens (e.g. Harik, 1994; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Tessler, 2002; Tohidi, 2016). For example, Rose *et al.* (1998) argue that democratic values such as pluralism and tolerance of diversity result in successful democracy. In another example, Tohidi (2016) emphasised the role of civil society organisations, particularly an effective grassroots women's movement for improving women's rights and building a secular and democratic political state. This study aims to examine the ways in which the women engage with key concepts in the political realm including democracy and rights and women's working relationship to categories of political discourse about democracy, freedom and rights. While this study does not explore the possibility of democracy in Iran, it examines what these possibilities are in feminists' and women activists' views. In other words, this study examines the participants' perspectives

about factors that foster democracy as well as barriers to democracy and their views about the roles of grassroots and political culture on the process of democratisation.

Conclusion

Reviewing the literature about Iranian feminists and women activists suggests that being feminist is controversial and contested in Iran. Despite the importance of being ‘feminist’ in Iran, hardly any research examines the positions that Iranian feminists and women activists take in terms of ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’. Moreover, as women’s social position in Iran is problematic in a number of ways, this study explores the ways that feminists and women activists prioritise women’s rights. In addition, as women suffer from many forms of discrimination, democracy may be considered a good way to tackle the imbalance and discrimination. This research is going to explore feminists’ and women activists’ views, in terms of whether democracy should be secular or Islamic and factors that both foster democracy and are barriers to it. Importantly, it is notable that, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the literature considers Islamic feminists as a group of only reformist women. Therefore, the similarities and differences between conservative women as a type of Islamic women activists have not yet been examined. In this study, however, Islamic feminists and women activists are associated with both conservative and reformist women activists.

I take this forward into my own research by asking these questions:

- What are the characteristics of feminists and women activists in Iran?
- How do they prioritise women’s rights in Iran?
- What are the notions of gender equality among feminists and women activists?
- Does the conceptual space of democracy share the same meaning among feminists and women activists with different beliefs and strategies?

The questions listed here are not just a product of the investigation of the literature. In an iterative process involving consideration of existing research, the development of my fieldwork, my analysis of it and further consideration of the literature they have

evolved. Aspects of these dynamic processes will be further discussed in the next chapter where I will explain the methodology and methods used to conduct this research.

CHAPTER THREE: Studying Feminists and Women Activists in Iran

Introduction

This research based on Iranian feminists' and women activists' characteristics and their perspectives on feminist and feminism, women's rights and democracy, aims to bridge the gap in academic research by investigating a variety of types of feminist and women activist. This may influence academic understanding about Iranian women's characteristics and their views on democracy, rights and a fair society. As was established in the previous chapter, my thesis positions the interviewees as women who work within difficult gender politics and take different strategies to improve women's rights. Due to the complicated context that these feminists and women activists engage in, this study will contribute to the work of feminists and women activists of different beliefs and views, and policy makers in Iran, by examining their respective similarities, differences, and requirements.

This chapter discusses the research design, sampling process, the designing of the research interview questions, ethical issues, the interview process, and the data analysis. It explains the reasons why I conducted my fieldwork in two major phases in Iran and the ways that I recruited participants during these phases. In addition, as I interviewed a variety of types of Iranian feminists and women activists, I explain my positionality in the interview process and data analysis.

Researcher Positionality

My motivation for conducting this research developed out of my position as a new mum who had started her PhD when her child was only twenty days old. My experience during pregnancy in the UK was an influential factor in choosing my topic. As a pregnant woman who had been accepted by the university and was very enthusiastic to start her PhD, the negative comments I received from a number of

people made me feel excluded from certain parts of the society, such as attending the university after becoming a mother. I felt that both Iranian and British cultures limited my aspiration because of my new role. For example, when my midwife realised I was going to study for a PhD after having my baby, she warned me that ‘you need to look after your son’. This type of comment mostly associates the role of caring with me rather than both me and my husband, and it started me on a new phase of experiencing being woman. In addition, I faced further difficulties after starting the course, such as not being entitled to maternity leave due to being an international student who needed to start her course 20 days after giving birth, and a lack of access to childcare through the university. This situation meant I was faced with many challenges only because I was a mum who dreamed of continuing her education. These experiences inspired me to think about gender inequality and what democracy is in the view of people who may experience reduced access to the supposed ‘benefits’ of democracy. For example, how do women define democracy?

In addition, the research derives from Iranian women’s issues, as they are deprived of basic important rights, such as having custody of their children and the right to divorce. As some feminist scholars (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1986; Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004) argue, structural differences between men and women have led to distinct beliefs and experience and views that create distinct knowledge. The different views and understandings of women in terms of women’s rights, gender equality and democracy are examined by this research. In addition, my position is based on the notion that women, as an oppressed group, have dual views; firstly, there is their view of their oppressors which they develop to survive, and secondly there is their personal view developed through experiences (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004). As Iran is at a crossroads in terms of democratisation, I was interested in exploring how feminists and women activists advocate a fair society, defend women’s rights, stand against discriminatory laws, and define democracy, and its possibilities. Many studies in Western contexts, such as Reinharz and Davidman (1992); Ribbens and Edwards (1997); Tobias (1997); Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004) assert that research conducted within feminist frameworks is attentive to issues of difference, social justice and questions the social power. I think that the views of Iranian feminists and women activists, who have sought systematically for women’s rights, are significant in terms

of the issues of equality, justice and a fair society, as they are the voice of different types of Iranian women with a continuum of beliefs. In addition, as these women are more likely to represent women's needs from different backgrounds, their understanding of democracy and women's rights could be influential in improving Iranian women's status. Importantly, exploring how these activists share ideas about a fair society alongside women's needs may be crucial to them in better understanding each other's requirements, and the areas in which they could work together in future. In order to explore how the women understand democracy, I decided to take an explanatory study which would equip me with the broader understanding of women's perspectives about democracy and women's rights.

I conducted qualitative research based on my concerns as rooted in my experience and my commitment to political change. Feminist researchers such as for example Marshall and Rossman (2014: 25) have argued that 'in qualitative inquiry, initial curiosities for research often come from real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher's direct experience, tacit theories, political commitments, interests in practice, and growing scholarly interests'. Many feminists who support qualitative research such as Smith (1987); Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2004); Marshall and Young (2006), argue that examining women's perceptions and experiences is significant and plays an important role in creating knowledge. Thus, to explore the conceptions of gender equality and democracy among Iranian feminists and women activists, this research as explanatory study focuses on women's perceptions and views. The methodology in this study is concerned with a feminist research methodological approach, as several authors have emphasised (Harding, 1987; Ribbens and Edwards, 1997; Letherby, 2003; Marshall and Young, 2006) particularly the collaboration of participants and the researcher, and a reflexive interpretation. For instance, Nielsen (1990) suggests a feminist who conducts feminist research should be aware of both feminist consciousness and the impact of the dominant class in the society. The researcher, as an Iranian feminist, was aware of the importance of the feminist research methodological approach and applied its implications for the specific context of this study.

While being a female feminist researcher is often considered a key factor in interviewing other women on issues about inequality and discriminations (Nielsen, 1990; Reinharz and Davidman, 1992), my identity is not confined to this characteristic. I have complex identities and play multiple roles, such as being a mother, an Iranian middle class citizen, and a secular person. It is significant to note that my position as an Iranian woman who has a child positioned me within the same sexual division of labour of women who have been oppressed within the same context; alongside other Iranian women. I had greater insight (compared with ‘outsider’ researchers) as a researcher into the lives of other Iranian women (Hartsock, 1983; Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, 2004). These similarities enabled me to engage with, and have a deep understanding of, Iranian women’s views. However, at the same time being a secular woman, it was possible that I would be considered an ‘outsider’ by some participants, in particular conservative women.

I need to acknowledge that I sometimes felt I was in tension for conducting this research. This acknowledgment is important, as Marshall and Young (2006: 72) stated: ‘A self-reflexive understanding of one’s identity is a necessary part of understanding the impact of one’s presence and perspective on the research’. For instance, I found myself more sympathetic towards secular accounts, but I attempted to reduce these feelings by first being aware of them (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997) and second by recognising the importance of a fair representation of different voices in order to reach a better understanding of which concepts of gender equality and democracy each group were proposing. The practical strategies in terms of my research position within the research process will be discussed in the *Fieldwork and Data Analysis Section*. Ribbens and Edwards (1997:138) asserted that ‘if researchers are to implement their theoretical and methodological commitments to being reflexive about the research process, both in the data analysis stage and throughout the entire research endeavour, a practical method of doing this is vital’.

In this explanatory study, semi-structured interviews as a qualitative data-gathering technique were used (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). Applying semi-structured interviews was effective for this research as it focuses on how the participants frame

and understand issues (Bryman, 2015), in terms of what the women viewed as important in understanding gender, rights and democracy. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were valuable because they allowed for some structure, which can be useful in research on sensitive and difficult issues such as feminism and women's rights, especially in the context of Iran where these topics may be difficult for participants to discuss. In addition, the flexibility in this type of interviewing (Bryman, 2015) allowed me not only to probe additional issues raised by women but also explore and understand the views of women from a range of perspectives. For example, as I interviewed religious and secular participants, the ways that I asked them questions were slightly different. For example, I asked more questions about the views of religious participants about the position of women in Islamic discourse and the ways that it can be improved (See Appendix B). Moreover, this method enabled me to have a free interaction with participants in order to explore women's perceptions of gender and democracy. Patton (2002) emphasised the importance of 'empathy' in interview, this involved me taking and understanding the Iranian women's stance and position. To understand the participants more deeply, I focused on both verbal and nonverbal communication in interviews. As writers such as for example Reinharz and Davidman (1992) and Reeves and Boyette (1983) have stressed that observation allows the participants' moods and gestures to express their frustrations to be revealed, when they cannot articulate their feelings.

Participant sampling

Being an Iranian woman familiar with the Iranian context facilitated planning the fieldwork in terms of factors such as security issues and access. Sampling was, however, not easy considering that during Ahmadi Nejad's time (See Table 1, P: 11-12), the majority of NGOs closed and the visible activities of Iranian women activists were limited (Chapter Two). During the first phase of my fieldwork (April-September 2014) Ahmadi Nejad was still in office, while the second phase happened in the UK and the last was conducted (June-September 2015) after Rouhani (See Table 1, P: 11-12) became president in Iran. In the first phase, I interviewed 11 women. However, during the last phase, accessing feminists and women activists was easier compared with the conservative time, and I conducted 31 interviews during this stage.

As discussed in this thesis, Iranian feminists and women activists are not a homogenous group and their different backgrounds and experience has an influence on their views in terms of the way they construct gender and democracy. To access these various types of women, I attempted to choose samples carefully to achieve information-rich cases. Sampling from a diverse range of feminists and women activists, and capturing the distinct perspectives of women's rights and democracy, was performed to attain a broader exploration of the issues about gender equality and democracy among Iranian women activists.

At the beginning of my work I intended exploring Islamic feminists and secular feminists to explore how a continuum of beliefs and strategies –religious and secular –might influence women's views. These two main categories were based on reviewing the relevant literature (see Chapter Two). Therefore, I structured my sample in the first stage of my fieldwork according to Islamic and secular feminists. However, after my initial phase of fieldwork it became clear that this typology was unable to capture the identities of the participants I had spoken to. The interviewees all saw themselves as activists, while identifying themselves as: feminist, secular feminist, Islamic feminist, religious women rights' activists, and conservative women. I realised these different identifications were important to explore further and include. This led me, for the second phase of fieldwork, to seek to recruit participants based on these different set of categories/identities, which I developed from the categorisations stated by interviewees. The importance of self-definition has been emphasised by several scholars such as Reinharz and Davidman (1992: 6) who suggested solving the practical problem (how we identify people) by using self-definitions:

... sometimes people who do not want to be labeled 'feminist' are given the label anyhow. Conversely, some people who want to be acknowledged as feminist are not. That these differences exist is fortunate because the lack of orthodoxy allows for freedom of thought and action.

This approach to identification is significant, particularly in the Iranian context due to the sensitivity around the term feminism. To bridge the gap between the self-identifications of participants and literature categories, I created my own categories that acted as devices to place women within the continuum of beliefs and strategies.

Therefore, three categories were established to examine the women's perspectives: secular women, religious reformist, and religious conservative women.

At the beginning of my research, my focus was on interviewing religious and secular women with various characteristics, such as age, education, and employment. I applied different recruitment strategies to access a variety of Iranian women activists. As discussed in Chapter One and Two, activism is defined in a variety of ways but the definition that I work with focuses on women who engage with social change in a variety of degrees. I was looking for activists who focus on women's position in society; however, with different analyses of the social field, and seeking different degrees of social change. Based on this definition of activist, firstly, looking at different websites⁹ and publications related to women's issues, and also reading news about politicians known to be women's rights activists, enabled me to access some respondents. Secondly, I attended a pre-symposium meeting in London where Iranian feminists gathered, and a conference in Iran on the topic of female circumcision. These two events helped me to arrange interviews with a few women. Thirdly, in some cases, participants were used as key informants to help snowballing. This type of sampling enhanced my opportunities to identify cases which were likely to be information-rich (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). In addition, this strategy was especially useful for accessing conservative women who could potentially have mistrusted a researcher from a 'Western' university. This was significant in the sampling process as it allowed me to have easier access and identify participants who would have been difficult for me to reach. Finally, through the trade union federation website,¹⁰ I was able to make contact via email with people who linked me to women activists connected with labour issues.

Initially, I had planned on interviewing 30 participants including 15 religious and 15 secular women. However, I came up with 47 participants whose self-definitions were

⁹ See: <http://feministschool.com/english/> and <http://www.learningpartnership.org/iran-oms>

¹⁰ See <http://www.world-psi.org/>

broader than the categories represented by the literature. Table 2 below shows the number of participants in accordance with their self-identities.

Table 2: Number of participants based on their self-identity

Category	Accessed number
Secular feminists ¹¹	15
Islamic feminists	10
Feminists	3
Religious women rights activists	9
Conservative women	10
Total	47

Based on the approaches that participants apply to advocate women’s rights, I categorised these five self-defined groups of women into three categories. The following reasons explain how I created my own categories (See Figure 1, P: 53). First of all, I put women who called themselves feminists but who were not secular, Islamic feminists and religious women activists into the religious reformist women category. The reason for this categorisation is based on their approach being to improve women’s rights via the re-interpretation of the Quran and reforming religion. All of these women have the same approach to advocacy; however, with distinct self-definitions. For example, three women activists were identified by other feminists and women activists as Islamic feminists, and also during the interview these three held religious reformist notions and strategies; however, they avoided identifying themselves as Islamic feminists, preferring instead to be called only ‘feminists’, as they argued that these labels generate barriers that discourage women from working together. Second, women who identified themselves as conservative women were categorised as religious conservative women. This was due to their different traditional approach to women’s rights. Third, self-defined secular feminists were categorised as secular feminists, because their approach to improve women rights was driven from the separation of religion and legal system/women’s rights (For further

¹¹ 10 women interviewed in Iran and 5 in the UK.

information see Chapter Four). It is important to mention here that these categories are not solid which means that they are dynamic, complex and multidimensional concepts and in different time and place they are different. For example, someone who self-identified as a secular feminist may still be influenced by religious values. Similarly, someone who primarily self-identified as an Islamic feminist or as a religious women's rights activist may at times take a secular approach.



Figure 1: Three different categories based in the self-definitions of participants and number of women in each category

Secular, religious reformist, and conservative women were also drawn from different backgrounds, such as journalists, academics, politicians, artists, lawyers and women who connected with labour issues. Despite having a sample of women from different backgrounds, being an Iranian woman who used to live in a similar context of a dominant patriarchal culture helped me to be aware of issues and problems that Iranian women face. May (2011), in his book on *Social Research*, suggested a similar idea in that the researcher should be aware of the social setting in order to understand its social dilemmas. The understanding of women's issues was therefore significant and facilitated the process of sampling.

Having women from a variety of backgrounds helped me to explore a possible range of views of Iranian feminists and women activists for a deeper analysis and understanding of issues that might be affecting them differently. The following points show the biographical aspects of participants:¹²

- The number who had a PhD: 24
- The numbers who had a Master's degree: 14
- The numbers who had an undergraduate degree: 7
- The numbers who had a diploma: 2
- The numbers who were academics: 25
- The numbers who were lawyers: 4
- The numbers of politicians and former politicians: 7
- The numbers of women who worked in cultural industries such as publishers, journalists, bloggers and directors: 17
- Others employments, including teachers and managers: 2
- The number who were connected with labour issues: 5
- Age range: 28 to 71

Looking at these numbers illustrates that the women are from educated and middle class groups. However, this research did not just aim to interview a particular type of woman and I attempted to interview women from different class backgrounds. This

¹² Some of the women had multiple jobs, and therefore appear more than once in the above list.

may be significant that there is a strong association between being a women activist in Iran and a specific class and educational status. This is also illustrated by Iranian author Tohidi (2016), who argues that the women's movements have predominantly been created by the urban middle class in major cities of Iran. Under repressive and authoritarian Islamic regimes, which have blocked the effectiveness of the activities of women's rights advocates, the women's movement has a long way to go to include distinct classes in rural areas and small towns.

As part of this research, I had a small advisory team which included secular and religious reformist experts, and later a conservative woman and an international secular expert. These advisors not only acted as key informants and linked me to feminists and women activists, but also they advised me about distinct ways to access information about Iranian women's activities, their meetings and the beliefs and values of religious women. By connecting them through their public emails, I was provided with their telephone numbers. After talking together on the phone several times, we arranged individual meetings. Marshall and Rossman (2014) recommend that researchers have 'critical friends' to critique the study throughout the research process. My selection was based on the perception that these well-known women activists in Iran were aware of the debate about women's issues that exist there. Therefore, they were selected as my key informants, which also helped me to gain access to other participants.

The secular advisor was found from Iranian websites¹³ at the beginning of the fieldwork. Through accessing her public email, we started our communication and she provided me with her telephone number in order to further discuss my project. We met each other in her office several times and I received some information about the situations of feminists and women activists in Iran, including information about the nature of their activities during Ahmadi Nejad's time. She provided me with some information about a variety of ways in which feminists and women activists gather

¹³ This website can be accessed through the following link:
<http://feministschool.com/english/>

and work together. This secular advisor linked me to some feminists by sending them an email and introduced me to them.

Through snowball sampling, the second adviser, who was a religious reformist woman, was identified in the second phase of the fieldwork. After starting our communication by her public email, I was invited to her house. This helped me not only to interview her, but we also established a good relationship. She was an expert in terms of reinterpretation of Quran in a more ‘woman friendly’ way. Having her as my key informant helped me to access other religious reformist women and I also received advice about some particular ideas related to reforming women’s rights. For example, during the fieldwork, religious reformist participants applied particular terms or beliefs such as *Ijtihad*, the religious reformist advisor unpacked these terms for me. This helped me understand fully the idea of reform, this both influenced the quality of my interviews with religious reformist women and the process of the analysis of data.

In addition, during the first stage of my fieldwork, I established a strong relationship with two more women. An international secular woman, who is based overseas and is involved in international politics/activism, and a conservative expert. As an international advisor, this woman had published many studies on religious and secular feminists in Iran, a number of which have been referenced in this research. She provided me with her telephone number through her public email, and we later communicated by phone. Her suggestions as an ‘outside’ researcher who worked with Iranian women activists has been important in conducting this research. For example, she shared some of her experiences related to interviewing feminists and women activism in Iran. She also advised me to interview some key feminists and women activists. Regarding the conservative expert, I identified her by snowball sampling. One of the participants introduced her to me and by sending her an email and introducing me to her we started our communication. She was familiar with conservative women and she not only acted as a key informant, but also helped me to understand certain issues facing conservative participants. For example, when I struggled to understand conservative participants’ ideas about women’s employment,

my conservative adviser opened up the link between ideas around women's employment and conservative religious beliefs.

Research interview schedule

To design the interview schedule, I undertook intensive reading about feminism and democracy to explore the historical and theoretical setting of feminists and democracy. Moreover, throughout the process of refining the questions, I was careful to avoid leading the participants to the fullest extent possible by using strategies such as using open questions. The preliminary reading stage helped me to prepare the basis for themes around which the research questions were outlined.

As Wengraf (2001) states, the research questions 'govern' the production of the interview schedule. However, research questions are based on the language of the research community and interview questions are formulated in the language of the participant. As this research included a variety of feminists and women activists, designing questions was based seeking to explore their beliefs,¹⁴ understandings, and perceptions of gender, rights and democracy. In order to understand different views and issues in a deeper and extensive manner, three drafts of the interview schedule were adjusted according to the recommendations of my supervisors.

The fieldwork of this research was divided into three phases (this is fully explained in the section on Fieldwork, P: 63): the first phase took place in Iran, the second in the UK, and the third and final phase was back in Iran. For the first phase, the interview questions were designed to discover the background and characteristics of Iranian feminists and women activists and how they understand gender equality and democracy. After finishing my first phase, in which eleven women participants were interviewed, I came back to the UK in order to pre-analyse and refine the interview schedule. Based on the pre-analysis of the first phase of interviews and the themes

¹⁴ The advisory team from different backgrounds played an important role to design the research questions for women from distinct categories.

that emerged from them, a few questions were revised and I added a few probe questions to develop the understanding of women's views further. For example, the research schedule designed for first phase of the fieldwork was based on the preliminary reading. In the first stage, the topic of my research was about the conceptions of democracy among secular and religious feminists. According to the literature I read, the two terms 'feminists' and 'women's rights activists' were not differentiated. However, within the field, I realized that the concept of feminism is highly controversial in Iran. There were some women who personally believed in feminism but avoided labelling themselves as feminist, as this word is not accepted by all people in society. Also, some women activists might be labelled as feminist by other women but when I interviewed them they disagreed with this label and questioned the term feminism, regarding it as a Western concept (see Chapter Four). Therefore, I learned in the fieldwork that I should use this term with caution. I revised the interview schedule designed for the first stage and added a question on which label participants preferred: women activists or feminist (See Appendix A and B). Therefore, in other phases of the fieldwork, I attempted to be more cautious in terms of applying certain terms. Moreover, the first stage of the fieldwork provided me with information about a variety of women activists,¹⁵ such as conservative women in Iran, and helped me to prepare more probing questions to explore and understand distinct views deeply.

I conducted five interviews with feminist/women's rights activists in the UK as I discovered that an important meeting was happening in UK and I thought this meeting was a useful opportunity to interview some Iranian feminist/women activists based in the UK. Moreover, this stage provided me with the opportunity to check and improve the interview questions. I explored whether the opinion and voices of the Iranian feminists and women activists were different under distinct political circumstances (UK and Iran). In other words, this stage became an opportunity for me to assess the credibility of interview questions conducted in Iran, where women's freedom of speech is limited. However, the analysis of data illustrated that there was no such

¹⁵ For example, I was unaware of some conservative female activists in Iran, as most articles that I read before the fieldwork did not address them. This neglect is more likely rooted in the viewpoints of the writers and the women, who were mostly reformist and secular, and do not consider conservative women as women's rights activists due to their particular positions/ways of advocating women's rights.

difference, and thus no interview questions were changed for the next phase; I also did not differentiate between women interviewed in the UK and in Iran when discussing the findings.

In the third phase, a similar list of questions was used as in the second stage (Appendix B), which covered three broad areas: the background of women activists, their characteristics, and the meanings of gender equality and democracy for them.

The first part of the interview schedule looked at the participants' background (e.g. personal information, the way they were brought up,¹⁶ and how gender roles were distributed in their family. It also covered how they became a women activist, when they did so, and if there was a particular event, experience or person which led them to become involved in feminism. They were also asked what they wanted to achieve. The second part focused on: the participants' characteristics of secular and religious reformists and religious conservative women activists, e.g. the importance of being a women activist; their views on the key goals for the women's movement in Iran; and the ways they described the type of women activist they are, such as secular or religious or without a label, as well as the ways that they prioritise women's rights in their activities. The third part aimed at exploring Iranian women activists' views on gender and democracy: the meaning of democracy and its possibilities; the meaning of gender equality; the extent that Iranian women's rights are in accordance with human rights; whether the interpretation of the Quran helps the democratic process; and, for religious women, how they balance the authority of God with the authority of the people.

Information Form, Debriefing Sheet, and Consent Form

The background information for respondents was provided with the information form (Appendix C) and the debriefing sheet (Appendix D), through which participants were

¹⁶ Including exploring whether they were brought up within a religious/ non-religious family

informed of the nature of my research, before signing the consent form (Appendix E) and agreeing to interviews. The information form provided the respondents with information about the purpose of the study, the length of the interviews, the ethical use of the data and their rights such as ending the interview and withdrawing their data at any time. This form enabled participants to understand the basic information about the study and helped them to think about the research and be prepared for the actual interview. The debriefing sheet contained more details about the aims of project and the ways that participants could keep in touch with the researcher to be informed about the progress of the study. Moreover, this sheet contained the contact details of the supervisors to access further information about the research. In some cases, I sent the information and debriefing sheets by email prior to the time of interview. However, in other cases, I gave the respondent ten to fifteen minutes to read through the information form, debriefing sheet, and consent form and whenever they needed it I went through the forms for clarity. The material was provided in English so that the ethics review could occur. I did not translate the material into Persian as the majority of participants were educated and understood basic English. In the few cases where the participants' English language was poor, I interpreted all the information forms and debriefing sheets and consent form to double check that they fully understood the information. In all of the interviews, I carried with me a copy of the information form and debriefing sheet for the respondents and two copies of the consent form that needed to be signed by myself and the participants.

In terms of the consent form, it was provided to the participants and they were asked to read through, and if they had any questions and concerns I was there to clarify for them. After reading through the consent form, the participants and I needed to sign the sheet if they agreed to the interview. This stage was sometimes problematic, as in several cases, respondents appeared to be uncomfortable with signing this form quickly and preferred to keep it in order to have more time to read through it again. This seems to have been due to the fact that consent forms are unfamiliar in Iran, and these participants were concerned about their signature. I explained to the respondents that the reason they need to sign was for a university ethics committee approval requirement. In these cases, the application of a consent form was challenging, so I recorded the consent on the digital recorder. The different meanings of the consent

form in different contexts such as Iran suggest that how Western rules and university regulation might not work in different contexts. This raises issues about the ways we have to adapt to achieve consent, for example taped consent.

In my fieldwork, as a sociologist, I realised how signing a form that was intended to protect the participant's rights could be misunderstood as a potential risk due to the cultural differences between the two (British and Iranian) cultures. For example, Marshall and Rossman (2014) assert that a consent form is a uniquely Western cultural concept and is based on the principles of individualism.

Ethical issues

Attending the workshops and sessions on ethics that the university provided for postgraduate students played an important role in being informed of the distinct dimensions that research might be ethically engaged with. In addition, as part of the university's policy I completed the ethics form before starting the fieldwork, which helped me to understand a number of the ethical issues that my research dealt with. Completing the ethics forms encouraged me to think through the details of the type of research I was doing, the level of confidentiality and anonymity that it involved, and the strategies that I could use to comply with ethical research rules. As Bryman (2015:507) suggests, 'if researchers are aware of the issues involved then they can make informed decisions about the implications of certain choices'. Consequently, I started my fieldwork with this valuable knowledge and, as this research contains political critique of the state, as a researcher I had to maintain a high level of anonymity and confidentiality.

At the very beginning of the interviews I explained to the participants that they would not be personally identified. However, in most cases they asked me to mention their real name. It seemed to me that as they are political figures and well known women's rights activists they had already expressed their positions and ideas in public through their activities, such as conferences, publications, and websites. Therefore, despite my commitment to confidentiality and anonymity of the data, many of the women said

they wished to be identified for their views. However, as a researcher who needs to stand for ethical and confidentiality rules, I avoid mentioning their real names in this thesis. Moreover, as only a few did not request to be identified, it would have been difficult for me to draw a binary between women who wished to mention their real name and participants who did not.

Having elite participants in my research, I was aware of the fact that there were some confidential quotations that had a potential risk for family relations, the participant's career, and public status. There were quotations that had the potential to create conflict in their family. For example, during the interview with one of my participants, who was a member of parliament, she talked about her private life and how she had many difficulties raising her children and studying at university without any help from her husband. She complained about her husband and was still living with him. I was aware of the fact that she may have become emotional as she narrated the reason she became a woman activist. I was cautious not to use quotations related to her private life, as through these she could be identified.

In terms of anonymity, having well known participants made the process of anonymity challenging. As some of the background information might have led to the participants in question being identified, I decided not to include this information. For example, in one case the person's background could have been associated with her notions and meaning of gender equality and democracy, but I avoided using her sensitive information. It was a conflictual process for me as I felt that I was unjust for not representing her views appropriately. In addition, as most of the participants of this research were public figures, they had had interviews in the news and written publications which could be used as secondary data to clarify their quotations and ideas; however, I avoided including these secondary data beside their quotations as they could be easily identified. After completing the ethical approval procedure, I went through the approval for doing fieldwork overseas.

Risk Assessment Form and Approval for Outside Study

Despite careful preparation of the documentation and required materials of the university, the applications for approval of the risk assessment and fieldwork abroad, in both phases of my fieldwork in Iran took a considerable time. The university was concerned with the level of risk that my fieldwork posed to me, and due to their concerns about the first phase of data collection in Iran, I revised the information of the risk assessment form and information about how I would manage being a lone researcher three times to reassure the university that I had thoroughly planned my research. I also experienced difficulties with the insurance company used by the university, because they are American and therefore covered by the US policy on sanctions with Iran. Consequently, I sought insurance cover for six months from an Iranian company. While the university paid the cost of my insurance in this phase, I found the process very time consuming and sometimes I felt that political issues were affecting my study and would be problematic for my research. I do appreciate the concern of the university for me, but filling in the risk assessment form sometimes made me feel how I was unnecessarily limited when I had to explain the ways that I could 'minimise' some 'potential' conflict with certain strategies, such as being accompanied by my father or my husband when travelling from one location to another in Iran. Using these strategies to tackle potential risks, in order to satisfy the university, was in conflict with my personality as an Iranian citizen and woman used to driving her own car in Iran. Despite all the concerns of the university for the level of risk, I successfully finished the first phase of my fieldwork in Iran.

However, surprisingly, the approval procedure was again controversial and complex for the next phase of travelling to Iran which was fairly similar to the first time. The university had the same concerns for the level of the risk that I might face in Iran, as well as with the insurance. As my supervisors helped me through these processes, we felt at times we were falling through the gaps between my school and the graduate school over who would ultimately make decisions, and who would cover the private insurance. In the end, I had to take out insurance myself in order to gain approval.

Fieldwork

As mentioned before, there were three phases of fieldwork, including two major parts that took place in Tehran, Iran and one in the UK. The decision to conduct the fieldwork in two main phases in Iran was related to the need to ensure that the first phase of the fieldwork could respond to the research questions. Analysing the first phase interviews of my fieldwork thus gave me a clearer focus and rationale for the research. The gap between the two main phases helped me to identify key themes in the data, and this was not only useful for what I examined in the next phase in Iran but also for my continued analysis.

First phase: Getting settled in Iran and meeting the research advisors

This first phase took place between April 2014 and September 2014. I provided myself with a quiet place to study in our house and sought childcare, as I had my one and half years old son in the field. I made sure that I had all the materials needed for the interviews, such as photocopied consent forms, information and debriefing sheets. I separately met two of my research advisors and sought their views about the interview schedules and their recommendations for reading secondary data, such as women's magazines. Importantly, as these advisors were also my key informants, they linked me to other feminists and women activists for interviewing.

Recruitment during the first phase

As discussed in Chapter Two, during this time the majority of NGOs had closed and the policies of the state changed in terms of gender relations. Within this atmosphere, I applied two strategies to recruit the participants. Firstly, before I left the UK, through different websites and publications I obtained the emails of a few potential participants and kept in touch with them by email. They sent me their phone numbers to contact them during the fieldwork to discuss more about my research project and arrange a date for interview. Secondly, having key informants and using snowball sampling helped me to access less visible feminists and women activists in Iranian society during the first phase of fieldwork. I was introduced to the potential participants through email or phone, by my gatekeeper or interviewees. Using these

methods facilitated my entry into the network of feminists and women activists and their 'private' realm. Through using the two strategies, I created a list of all potential interviewees, and a few of the women were contacted to arrange interviews one/two weeks later. In rare cases, the interviews had to be rearranged. Surprisingly, I was not faced with many refusals or cancellations during this phase, except for one woman who was unable to attend an interview due to family issues.

For recruiting feminists and women activists, I was aware of the ways that my multiple identities could influence the women's decision to accept or reject my request for interview. Therefore, to encourage the participants to be interviewed, I positioned myself and my research such that we were all women activists fighting for a fair society and were all responsible for improving the condition of Iranian women, regardless of being religious, secular, powerless and powerful, and an outsider or insider of Iran. In addition, it is worth mentioning here that being a PhD candidate based outside Iran¹⁷ and whose thesis would be published in English, was considered an important factor in being accepted by the majority of women in this phase, particularly the interviewees who were in a high political position, such as those Members of Parliament who were religious reformist. Studying a PhD in a Western university gave my work status to them as my potential academic publication in English is considered as an opportunity to be heard 'universally'.

Iranian feminists and women activists in this phase were very supportive and helpful, providing me with an encouraging atmosphere in which to conduct my interviews. I interviewed eleven women at this stage in Iran, including six women who defined themselves as Islamic feminists, and five who identified themselves as secular feminists. As I aimed to pre-analyse the first phase data in order to focus on the major themes raised by the participants, I transcribed and translated the interviews alongside the pre-analysis in this phase.

¹⁷ Researching outside Iran in a place where state policies would not limit my work allowed me to talk more freely compared with 'Insider' feminists and women's rights activists.

Back to the UK, second phase recruitment

In April I went to London as I realised that there is a conference was happening in there and I thought it would provide an opportunity to recruit women's rights activists from Iran, living in the UK. In order to interview women at this stage in the UK, I attended a meeting related to the 26th IWSF (Annual International Conference of the Iranian Women's Studies Foundation) Conference.¹⁸ As it was an important meeting in which the majority of feminists and women activists who live in London were supposed to gather, I thought it was a good opportunity to interview some feminists and women activists who live in UK. This gathering gave me the opportunity to identify and connect with a number of women to interview. Four participants, who identified themselves as secular feminists, agreed to be interviewed in the same week in London, and these were held in cafes around their home about two weeks afterwards. I was also introduced to a fifth participant, a self-defined secular feminist, in the UK through the media. She was an Iranian director who had made a film about an Iranian girl faced with many problems in a patriarchal society. I contacted with her by email and asked her if she considered herself a feminist or woman activist, and also if she was willing to be interviewed. After she accepted my request to be interviewed, we arranged a date. My similar identity with the participants, being a secular immigrant woman, and also studying a PhD in this phase, helped me to have a productive recruitment. Having analysed the interviews in phases one and two and refining the interview schedule for the last stage of fieldwork, I set off for Iran for the final stage.

Third phase

The third and final phase of the fieldwork took place in Iran from 14th June 2015 to 8th September 2015. As I mentioned in the previous section, there were difficulties getting the required insurance again in this phase. While I dealt with the insurance issues, the process of settling down in this phase was less complicated (for me and my family) compared with the first phase. Being familiar with the context influenced the

¹⁸ See following link on the conference website in both Farsi and English:
<http://www.iwsf.org/iwsf2015>

ways in which the necessary needs were met. For example, tackling living facilities, accommodation, and childcare was easier and faster. In addition, I had all the materials (prepared in the first phase) needed for the fieldwork, such as copies of consent forms and the list of potential participants. With the logistic factors settled, I was then ready for the final phase of the fieldwork.

In this phase, I applied a different approach to recruit women. Firstly, having the first phase of the fieldwork was helpful to identify a few women through my key informants and snowballing, which generated a list of women with their public emails and office's numbers. Secondly, as the third phase of the fieldwork was conducted during when a reformist government was in place (2013-present) women activists had become more visible in the public sphere (see Chapter Two). Therefore, they were holding conferences through which I could connect with more women. As I became familiar with the women's network during the first phase of fieldwork, this familiarity helped me to be aware of these events and conferences more easily. A few of the women were identified through one such conference. Thirdly, some were identified before I travelled to Iran for the third phase through the website, 'feminist school'¹⁹, by searching on the Internet, Facebook, and the articles and books I had read as part of my research, as well as the films of which they were director. Fourthly, people in the trade union federation²⁰ put me in touch with Iranian trade unions and consequently a few women activists.

This third phase is considered a significant phase as I identified a number of conservative women to interview. While my position as an academic woman studying outside Iran was an influential factor in recruiting women in phases one and two of the fieldwork, and also of reformist and secular women in phase three, this positionality could have had a negative impact on the conservative women. This related to my association to the 'West' and 'Western notions' (see Chapter Two, Chapter Four). The majority of conservative women who were contacted did not want to be interviewed, especially with someone from a 'Western' university with a topic

¹⁹ <http://www.feministschool.com/> is used by Iranian women activists to share their ideas.

²⁰ For more information, see the following website: <http://www.world-psi.org/>

on gender equality and democracy (see Chapters Four and Five). In order to encourage conservative women to be interviewed, I had a long conversation with them over the phone before our meeting and explained the benefit of my research for Iranian women. Moreover, it was stressed that they are an important part of society whose voices need to be heard. I explained that although I am not conservative, I am a neutral person who attempts to understand the priorities of women's rights and concept of a fair society from different views even though they might not believe in democracy; by this I meant that I was interested in exploring what type of state they believe in, if democracy is not their ideal model. I successfully encouraged ten out of thirteen conservative women I contacted to be interviewed.

In this phase, only one secular woman who was a public figure rejected an interview, arguing that she was not keen to be involved in political issues. Thirty-one women activists were recruited in total in this phase, as follows:

- Ten self-defined conservative women
- Four self-defined Islamic feminists
- Nine self-defined religious women rights activists
- Three self-defined feminists
- Five self-defined secular women

Conducting interviews

The ways that I conducted interviews were similar, except that all of the interviews in the first phase took place in the participant's home or office. However, in phase three I conducted some interviews in public places, such as parks and cafes. This difference can be justified by the change in the political context. As discussed in Chapter Two and Four, during Ahmadi Nejad's time most of feminists and women activists were invisible in the public sphere. Instead, they gathered privately. However, women have been enjoying more freedom during Rouhani's presidency.

Before starting the first phase of fieldwork, I consulted, by phone, a number of friends who had experiences with feminist activities in Iran to become familiar with the

different challenges I might face. These comments helped me to plan for different situations. Moreover, I had twice tested the research schedule to assess language, leading questions, timing and the harmony of the questions. Within the fieldwork, in order to pre-test the interview schedule, I conducted three pilot interviews and transcribed them into both Persian and English. The pilot stage, which took place at the beginning of the first stage of my fieldwork in Iran, prepared me for conducting interviews, and through which I experienced the atmosphere of the interview and the ways I needed to deal with issues which might arise during them. This also enabled me to practise the essential strategies which are important in addressing the issues between the multiple positionality of the researcher and others. For example, my research participants were mostly professional women, such as writers, artists, directors, and members of parliament. During my pilot stage, I found it very difficult to interrupt the interviewee because of their high position and the power structure. Consequently, the first and second pilot interviews lasted 2-3 hours because I was too shy to stop them. However, the third pilot took two hours, as practising the first two pilots enabled me to be more confident to lead the interviews, and so I attempted to interrupt whenever needed. I appreciate my PhD not only for research purposes, but also for developing my personality and skills.

For the pilots I interviewed three women from different backgrounds to reflect a mini version of my full scale study. The first pilot was conducted with a secular woman, who was a lecturer at a university. The second woman was a reformist religious lawyer who believed in a secular state. The third interview was a lecturer at a university teaching on a women studies module. She was a religious reformist woman who believed in the Islamic government. These women were drawn from distinct categories, in order to assess different themes in the interview schedule and I also included them in the data analysis. After translating the pilot interviews into English, the transcriptions were sent to my supervisors for observations, checking the quality of the interviews, and evaluating whether the interview questions were able to respond to the aims of the study. Having assessed these interviews, my supervisors suggested that I revise the interview questions to make them more probing. For example, I added more probing questions such as how women activists bring human rights and the Quran together:

- Which kinds of laws did they prefer? Laws based on human rights or laws based on the Quran. Why?

The interviews ranged from 90 minutes to two hours. Knowing that the interviewees were busy women, this length of interview was surprising. This suggests to what extent they were keen to talk and engage in being interviewed. As I mentioned earlier, it is more likely that this happened due to my positionality as an academic woman who publishes her work in English language, they felt that their ideas would be shared more widely²¹. The interviews were digitally recorded and at the same time I made some notes on either important points that I aimed to ask the participants later, or reactions which could not be recorded, such as nodding the head, body language, and facial expressions. In addition, I added some notes to record basic information such as where the interviews took place and who participated. These notes were important for me as they permitted me to return to my observation during the analysis stage (Patton, 2002) and led me to have a better interpretation of the women's accounts, especially in cases where they avoided talking and only their body language illustrated their position. For example, some of the secular women had a very strong position on the term 'Islamic democracy', and when I asked them whether they believed in this term or not, they did not elaborate their views and their facial expressions showed to what extent they disagreed with this term. Making notes about some issues drew my attention to concepts and themes that appeared within the interviews. For example, making notes about women's views on the term feminism and the way that they attached or detached themselves from this term was an important theme that I learned from the interviews, and was not included in my original interview schedule. Therefore, after this topic had been repeated several times by participants, I included it in my interview questions to explore their positions and notions relating to feminism.

In order to arrange interviews with participants, I contacted them by email, or more often on the telephone. Talking on the phone gave me an opportunity to establish a

²¹ It is worth mentioning here that most of publications in Iran are in the Persian language.

good relationship with participants prior to the interviews. Moreover, I pointed out that all their voices were important for my research, alongside appreciating their activities as they are all fighting to achieve to a more egalitarian society in different ways.

The majority of interviews were one to one, but in two cases participants were accompanied. One of the participants came with her friend²². I felt that having the second person in the interview discouraged her from elaborating on her background, such as the ways that gender roles are distributed in their home. The other interview took place in the participant's house, and at the end of the interview the interviewee's husband arrived and sat in the same room listening to us. I felt that the woman was uncomfortable and she answered the questions with short sentences that contradicted what she had said before. This woman, who identified herself as a conservative activist, mentioned that she did not prefer any specific label, either reformist or conservative, due to the political issues. However, she believed in the reformists' arguments about interpreting the Quran in accordance with the current issues in society. Interviewing her, particularly with her husband in attendance, was a good example for me to realise how some women, more likely religious participants, are under pressure to not express themselves freely, because of both public and private controlling factors.

In order to establish a safe and encouraging atmosphere, I had to take specific strategies to deal with this issue. For this, I attempted to present myself in a similar style as the women who I aimed to interview. For example, when I interviewed conservative participants I wore a *Hijab* to build trust. In this case, I hoped that I would not be perceived as 'the other,' indeed this seemed to make the interview more comfortable and thus more informative.

In one case, when I interviewed one conservative woman, I covered myself very strictly. The research participant started asking me who funded my research, how long

²² This woman just attended in the interview and did not participate in it.

I had lived in the UK, and what the purpose of the study was. This indicated that she was suspicious of me and my research and did not trust me at the beginning of the interview. However, she seemed more comfortable when I explained how I was passionate about women's issues in Iran and expressed my research concerns about women's issues without any boundaries, such as 'East', 'West', 'Muslim', 'Non-Muslim' and 'Secular' or 'Non-secular. I was surprised that after five minutes the interviewee suggested I should be more relaxed about covering myself, and she mentioned that she had already googled my name and realized that I do not wear the *Hijab*. Then I explained the importance of being trusted and creating a respectful environment for the interview, which was why I had tried to present myself in a strict *Hijab*. Also, it is an example of how I positioned my research in such a way to welcome all women who attempt to advocate women's rights.

Moreover, interviewing highly experienced participants was sometimes challenging, as we had a different power relationship. Most of them treated me better than my expectations. In my view, it could be due to my positionality, as they appreciated my efforts in studying a PhD in gender studies, a different country, a different language and having a young child. However, there were few cases, in which the interview was not conducted smoothly, the characteristic of the interviewee and tense atmosphere of the interview led me to feel too uncomfortable to interrupt and scrutinise them.

In terms of interviewing secular and religious reformist women, despite the above mentioned advantages of my positionality, there were cases that I felt interviewees might want to share issues that they assumed I wanted to hear. However, in terms of interviewing conservative women, several participants were very cautious about my positionality as they were unsure about my association with the 'West' and 'Western culture'.

It is important to mention that while conducting interviews, especially with reformists and secular women, I received many encouraging comments from participants and sometimes they even gifted me their books. They expressed how they appreciated the

value of my research. For example, one of the members of parliament who was also a senior figure in government hugged me after the interview and proudly said, ‘People like you are the future of our society’. This meant a great deal to me because I felt she was transferring a huge responsibility onto my shoulder, and gave me a sense of pride that brought tears to my eyes. I was empowered by such a comment to continue my research with even more commitment.

Fieldwork supervision

During the data collection in Iran, I communicated with my supervisors²³ both weekly and monthly. I sent them an email about the fieldwork every week and we had a Skype supervision every month. The report of the week included the number of women I had interviewed and how the interviews were conducted, and later we discussed the important issues on Skype. These communications made me feel I was supported and supervised all the time, which was influential in keeping on track. In addition, I had their observations and comments by sending them the transcribed interviews, which led me to add more probing questions, or in some cases ask questions in a different way. For example, I received useful suggestions from them for interviewing conservative women. As discussed earlier, I explained to conservative women that it was important for my research to explore what kind of state they believed in if they did not believe in democracy. These recommendations from my supervisors enabled me to motivate participants to feel included in my research and encouraged them to contribute to this study by expressing their views.

Transcribing and translating

All of the interviews that took place in Iran (42 women) were conducted in Persian, while the five interviews in the UK were undertaken in English. The eleven interviews conducted in the first phase of the fieldwork were transcribed in both Persian and English. The translated transcriptions were sent to my supervisors to be observe and assess the quality of the interviews. After analysing the first phase of interviews and with a clear focus and rationale for what I was exploring in my

²³ During my fieldwork my supervisors changed.

research, it was decided not to translate the rest of the interviews in the third fieldwork phase, in agreement with my supervisors. Instead, only those parts of the Persian text that I aimed to include in my thesis were translated. I had three reasons for not translating the interviews in phase three. First, the process of translating took me a long time and it was tiring. This was specially due to the long length of interviews. Second, transcribing only into Persian enabled me to be closer to the participant's meanings. Third, the time saving helped me to focus on translating the selected parts. Having these reasons, I transcribed all of the interviews in phase three only into Persian.

The process of translation is a challenging one. As Van Nes *et al.* (2010:313) argue 'interpretation of meaning is the core of qualitative research. As translation is also an interpretive act, meaning may get lost in the translation process'. Due to the sensitivity of this process and also as English is not my first language, I asked my English/Persian bilingual friend to help me translate the selected parts that I aimed to use in the thesis.

Her role as a second translator²⁴ who was born in the UK and is fluent in both Persian and English helped me to ensure that the meaning interpreted in the findings matched the meaning expressed by the interviewees as closely as possible (Polkinghorne, 2007; Van Nes *et al.*, 2010). As I had already analysed the transcriptions in Persian and was aware of the sections (themes) they would have allocated, the translations of the selected text were in accordance with contextual and cultural meanings. This influenced the validity and reliability of this research (Twinn, 1997; Squires, 2009; Van Nes *et al.*, 2010). As the translations of quotations might pose particular challenges, such as changing the voice of participants (Van Nes *et al.*, 2010) when translating the Persian quotations, I noted the context of the quotations and also any gestures, silent pauses, and mood used by participants. In addition, due to the fact that another person was involved in the process of translating, in order to tackle ethical

²⁴ We both translated the selected quotations together.

issues such as confidentiality and anonymity, I anonymised the sections which were translated before they were seen by the person helping me.

Some terms in the quotations in Persian are referred to in the glossary, where their meanings had no equivalent in English due to being related to the Iranian context or Islamic concepts. Had I translated these concepts into the nearest English words, there was a potential risk for them to be understood differently in English (Van Nes *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, I avoided translating these words and instead used a glossary to explain the meaning of the word in one or two sentences.

Data analysis²⁵

As Marshall and Rossman (2014) suggest, in order to identify truths, the researcher needs to be aware of strategies to store data and work systematically. Supervisions, reading through literature, and attending workshops on data analysis provided me with the required knowledge to analyse my data.

Bryman (2015) points out that qualitative data, which are very rapidly generated and collected by interviews, are unstructured textual material, and therefore analysis is not straightforward. Organization and analysis of the unstructured transcriptions of 47 interviews that ranged from 90 minutes to two hours was difficult and time consuming. Bryman (2015) argues that early stage analysis might help the researcher to alleviate the feeling of being swamped by the data. During the data collection, I started transcribing the interviews in Persian and reviewing my fieldwork notes to sharpen my understanding of the data. I read through the transcriptions. This stage aimed at developing the coding categories and start the formal coding in a systematic way (Patton, 2002). Moreover, I paused my interviews after conducting eleven interviews, which helped me to identify and code the significant remarks across interviews. This process also enabled me to be directed by the participants' views (See Appendix F). As I worked up the coding themes, I mapped them onto the sub-

²⁵ During my data analysis process my supervisory team changed for a second time.

headings that now appear (just the main sub-headings) in the data chapters. In other words, the ways in which the three data chapters were divided and sub-divided into the themes of the chapters emerged from the process of analysis. For example, Chapter Four became about the characteristics of religious and secular feminists and women activists. As discussed in this chapter, interviewing five women in UK and their analysis alongside the data analysis of the first stage of my fieldwork helped me to check the accuracy of interview questions and the data collected in Iran. The analysis of data illustrated that there was not differences between women in UK and Iran (see Chapter Two).

After data collection in the final phase of the fieldwork, reading through my transcriptions, frequently alongside listening to the recording of the interviews, helped me to identify the themes in my data. However, the process of identifying the themes and coding them was easier after the third phase, as most of them had been recognised before (after the first phase of data collection). I made some marginal notes about the similar concepts, which were highlighted using coloured highlighting pens. The process of coding built a foundation for my interpretive phase, in which the creative frameworks of interpretation were constructed, the meaning was determined, comparisons were made, and conclusions extracted (Patton, 2002). After coding the data, I started to realise the connections between codes. For example, due to being considered Western, the term feminism was not permitted by some women because it was stigmatised in the Iranian context, and because of the way that these women constructed the term feminism.

At this point, I attempted to connect codes and concepts and general theoretical ideas in order to focus on those that were key to my research questions. I found this stage a time consuming and tiring process, as I needed to deal with too many codes. This stage was followed by cutting and pasting codes and transcripts. I cut the same codes and paste them into a file. In order to identify the origin of each chunk of text, I mentioned the name of the person interviewed and in some cases I added the body language and facial expression provided by my fieldwork notes. In addition, to deal with an excess of codes in my study, I followed the advice of Bryman (2015) by

asking what my research codes had in common. This strategy enabled me to combine the existing codes into higher-order codes. Therefore, at the end of this stage, I had a word document for each theme which included the relevant quotations, sometimes a quotation would be coded in more than one way, and allocated to more than one folder.

In order to deal with the issue of losing the context of what was said related to each quotation within each folder, I used a process similar to what Bryman (2015) called 'problems with coding', by listening to each interview as much as possible. This process was effective as I could remember the meaning and the context attached to each quotation. Moreover, in cases where I had made notes about the body language that the participants used, this helped me to be closer and more familiar with the data.

As I was dealing with competing voices (secular, religious reformists and conservative women) during the analysis process, in order to represent all the respondents' views fairly, I repeated the various mantras about 'not getting emotionally involved' and not 'taking sides' (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997). Based on my own position as a secular woman, at the beginning of the process of data analysis my challenge was to practise not being biased with the data, and so I attempted to be sensitive to the criticisms that some researchers attribute to qualitative data. For example, Draper (2004) and Marshall and Rossman (2014) argue about the subjectivity of qualitative data and the roles that the researcher's own interests might play in this type of research. To improve understanding of the women's view of the concept of gender equality and democracy, I repeatedly read through transcripts and listened to the participants' voices. I also applied the experiences of other writers in the same position as me (Mahmood, 2011). Importantly, my supervisors made me aware of my positionality by their comments and helped me to cope with my personal interests by using different forms of analysis and different vocabulary. As a researcher, I was aware of my privileged position and therefore I attempted to ensure that the voices of my participants were heard and represented appropriately. One of the strategies applied in my research to keep my respondents' voices alive was to involve participants in the process of data analysis. I kept in touch with a few of them

during this process to ensure that meanings were negotiated and the analysis was more collaborative (Ribbens and Edwards, 1997).

Conclusion

The methodology and methods used for data collection were elaborated in this chapter. As discussed, the process of data collection took place during both conservative and reformist governments, and I explained the different approaches used for sampling and gaining access to women activists. Moreover, I discussed why and how I used semi-structured one to one interviews to collect data in this research. I reflected how some university ethical approval requirements such as a consent form might not be applicable in other contexts such as Iran. My position as a woman researcher was beneficial for data collection, understanding of women's issues and their experiences. In addition, different challenges that I faced in the process of data collection were explained in this chapter, such as conducting interviews during the conservative time, insurance, risk assessment, international fieldwork approval, recruiting conservative women, translation, and my positionality throughout all research stages. I also addressed helpful ways to tackle these issues, for example, the ways that I managed my multiple complex identity in order to have a fair data analysis. The themes identified in this process will be explored in the following three data chapters, beginning with the next chapter in which I discuss how Iranian women activists prioritise women's rights in Iran.

CHAPTER FOUR: Political Identity and a More Egalitarian Society

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter Two, since the Islamic Revolution of Iran, priority has been given to Islamic traditions, and there has been a reversal of the modernisation processes adopted in previous periods. Under Khomeini's presidency (1979-1989), the first President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the state suspended family protection laws. For example, there is no limitation on polygamy for men, and they may also easily divorce their wives with simple declarations, while retaining custody of their children. Moreover, the *Majlis* reserves severe punishment solely for women, and this includes flogging and stoning for crimes ranging from adultery to the breach of Islamic dress code (Esfandiari, 2010). However, after Ayatollah Khomeini's death, reformist clerics called for change in many areas (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). The debate on whether *sharia* injunctions should reflect contemporary society –rather than the different time and place in which the Quran was created –grew after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989. This debate led to calls for reformism known as 'dynamic jurisprudence' (Razavi, 2006: 1228), formed in opposition to 'traditional jurisprudence' (ibid). This debate among politicians and religious leaders suggests that Islamic laws and the interpretations of the Quran should be in accordance with real and contemporary issues of social policy and practice. The orthodox and traditional interpretations of the Quran were critiqued by reformists as they were assumed to be inapplicable to contemporary society.

Reformists' values flourished after Khomeini's death and, as Ramazani (1993: 418) noted, Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) 'was promising reform measures to improve the status of women'. During Rafsanjani's presidency, women were provided with more opportunities to go to school and university (Esfandiari, 2010). Women's status continued to improve considerably through the reformist process during the time of Khatami, the *Shi'a* theologian and reformist president between 1997 and 2005. However, this improvement did not last long since, as Tohidi (2016: 82) asserts, after 2005 'attempts towards some openness and improvement in human rights and

women's status have been blocked by the ruling hard-liners who still have the upper hand over the state'. Moreover, conservative leaders consider feminist and feminism to be problematic terms due to their link to 'western influence' (Tohidi, 2016). This socio-political context in which women activists have experienced many limitations has led them to take different positions about feminists and feminism.

The participants' accounts reflect the multi-faceted viewpoints women have about feminists and feminism. These views are important as they link to the ways that participants attempt to reach a more egalitarian society and, more importantly, to their voice and self-definition in terms of being a feminist within the context of Iran. While some research has been conducted on Muslim and secular feminists, there is very little research on whether 'feminists' or 'Islamic feminists' or 'secular feminists' (e.g. Povey, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008 Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006, Tohidi,2016) accept the labels that research often attributes to these women. In this chapter, I analyse the women's views about the terms 'feminists' and 'feminism' and explain their reasons for whether they reject or accept the term feminist as a label for themselves. Additionally, several studies have highlighted the similar views between secular and religious reformist women in terms of human rights (e.g.Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). However, this study assesses these views in detail among secular and religious reformists, as well as conservative women activists. Examining the characteristics and views of conservative women is significant as research to date has tended to focus on secular and religious reformist women rather than conservative women activists.

This thesis explores my data according to the three categories of secular feminists, religious reformist women and religious conservative women. As discussed in the previous chapter, these three categories are an important research finding and an outcome of the analysis of the first stage of the fieldwork. Based on different ways that the participants identified themselves, I developed my three categories and as well as being descriptive, and structuring my sample during the second stage of fieldwork, they structured my analysis. In other words, my development of a typology

of feminist and women activism in Iran is both a significant contribution to knowledge and a means of analysing the data in this study.

It is worth mentioning here that there is a language difference between ‘feminism’ and ‘women’s rights activism’ in Iran. The term ‘feminism’ is used untranslated in public discourse, for example the phrase ‘I am a feminist’ would be said in Persian as ‘*man feminist hastam*’. On the other hand, the term ‘I am a women’s rights activist’ can be said in Persian as ‘*man faale hoghoghe zan hastam*’. This language differences is significant to understanding why feminism is avoided by some participants and perceived as Western, instead they prefer to apply the term ‘women’s rights activism’ which is a Persian language term and considered an indigenous term.

This chapter outlines the research respondents’ views on the extent to which Iranian women activists accept the terms ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’, and how their positions on this influence their views about the ways in which they are seeking a more egalitarian society. The chapter is divided into two main sections. First, I explore three major stands taken by women activists in relation to the terms feminist and feminism. According to the women’s views, most conservative women critiqued both feminists and feminism and raised particular issues that they perceived were associated with Iranian women who defined themselves as feminist and the idea of feminism. While this group questioned both feminists and feminism, some religious reformist women said that, despite personally believing in feminism, they preferred not to be labelled as feminist. A third group, including the majority of secular women and some religious reformist women, believed in feminism and labelled themselves as either secular feminists or Islamic feminists. In this section, I analyse what is shaping the understanding of female activists about what the terms feminist and feminism mean and why these women take different positions about it. Section Two examines the different strategies that the participants applied in seeking to attain a fair society, such as agreeing or disagreeing with adopting human rights in Iranian society. The analysis of the women’s accounts illustrates that there is a link between their views about feminism and their strategies to reach a more egalitarian society.

Positioning women activists in Iran

This section analyses the range of views the participants expressed about their political identities. As discussed earlier, there are three different positions about the identity of participants. First, I will describe how and why the majority of conservative women questioned feminists and feminism. I analyse this group of participants first as the underlying factors behind their arguments provide a better picture of the complexity of the Iranian context, which is helpful in understanding the challenges that the two other groups face in Iran.

Criticising feminists and feminism

All conservative participants disconnected themselves from both feminists and feminism and critique the terms because of their perceived associations with specific problematic issues and also the way these terms are constructed among themselves. These participants raised a variety of reasons for critiques of feminists and feminism. In fact, these women applied the language of feminists but their language is clearly embedded in a critique of feminism. The major issue raised by these women was the association of feminists with the 'West', secularism, and the rights of women over their own body. Moreover, another issue they mentioned was the assumption that feminists believe women are weaker human beings. These points will now be considered in turn.

Analysis of the interviews demonstrated that most conservative participants critiqued local Iranian feminists as they perceived them as being linked to the 'West'. These women believed that the term 'feminist' belongs to Western culture and their solutions might not be matched with Iranian women's needs. These participants argued that a 'Western product' does not fit Iranian society. In their view, Iranian women's issues are different and, therefore, Iranian/Western feminists' issues are not applicable to them. For example, Yasi, a self-identified conservative woman, argued that:

Feminists who are located in Iran by copying Western feminists cannot help

women's issues in Iran [...] It upsets me that feminists feel they can decide on behalf of other women, and make decisions without asking other females' opinions. This is irritating to me as I have never liked others making decisions for me. Perhaps one of the reasons I entered the women activists field is to tell feminists that they should consider the women in remote areas of Iran and not just themselves and those around them.

Similarly, Parvaneh, who views herself as a conservative woman, argued that all voices need to be heard:

We do not have local feminists in Iran. Iranian feminists follow either liberal or socialist feminists. Religious women activists also do not have a particular method to defend women's rights...Iran differs in terms of culture and geography from the West. Therefore, we must look at the needs and demands of all Iranian women, and all of their voices must be heard, just as post-modernist notions imply. I do not agree with looking at issues universally.

In Yasi's view, local Iranian feminists should not make decisions for other women in different places and she raised the issue of the limitation of Iranian feminist ideas in local application. For her, these feminists not only relate to Western but urban culture, and therefore their issues are different from women who live in remote rural areas in Iran. For Parvaneh, there are no local feminists in Iran and a 'universal voice' is not applicable for Iranian women's needs. These accounts illustrate how these two women consider feminism as not particular to Iran. Their critique of the linkage between Iranian feminists and Western feminists influences them to detach themselves from feminists due to their views being seen as 'universalist' and therefore not applicable in Iran. While there is hardly any research which explores the characteristics of conservative women activists in Iran, some studies (e.g. Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Tohidi, 2016) argue that conservative political leaders view the associations between Iranian feminist and Western feminism as a problematic issue. This suggests, similar to conservative politicians, that conservative women activists question the link between feminists and the West. However, in the next chapter I will challenge this perception by showing how Iranian feminists are not simply advocating Western ideas. One reason which partly explains why most conservative women view similarity between local and Western feminists and disagree with adopting it in Iran is linked with the association of feminism to secularity.

Most conservative participants questioned Iranian feminism as a secular concept. The connection between feminism and secularism is problematic for them as, they argued, secularism does not sit well with their religious values. This argument resulted in their further distancing themselves from Iranian feminists, including religious women who advocated feminist ideas. For example, Parveneh critiqued religious reformist women for being similar to secular feminists advocating secularism. She labelled the reformist women's rights activists as feminists for (to her) appearing to support secularity:

Usually, feminists in Iran are secular. In terms of Muslim women (reformists) who are female activists, they keep their religious beliefs in their private sphere. The outlook of these women and those of secular feminists are similar. Perhaps they would not label themselves as feminists, but their outlook is not in accordance with Islam. These women are secular feminists who are Muslim.

The above quotation suggests that, due to the fact that secularism is in contrast with the faith of conservative women, the association between local feminists and secularism, constructed by most conservative women, seems to play an important role in their view of 'feminist' as a problematic term in Iran. Moreover, as will be discussed later in this chapter, in religious reformists' view, religion was seen as needing to be interpreted in a more flexible way in accordance with human rights. This view is problematised by the majority of conservative women as they perceived this opinion as supporting secularism, due to its compatibility with human rights. As there are some red lines for conservative men/women, such as disagreeing with the argument that women should have ownership over their own bodies; this creates limitations to how much they can support human rights. Therefore, the term feminism is seen as a threat by conservative women due to its association with secularity.

In Iran today, the secular idea that supports freeing women from traditional religious values and partly having freedom in their lifestyle choices, as well as ownership of their body, and choosing what to wear for example, is controversial. In the conservative leaders' view, these notions are inconsistent with the Islamic duty of the promotion of virtue and prohibition of vice, which is one of the essentials of the religion. Conservative leaders believe that by allowing women to choose, for

example, the *Hijab*, social corruption and immorality in society is propagated (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). This is significant as it shows how the issue of morality is highly contested in Iran. All conservative participants in this study perceived that feminists advocate the rights of women over their own bodies, and being able to make choices over such issues as abortion, sexual relationships outside of marriage, and the right to choose whether to wear the *Hijab*. All conservatives argue that these rights contradict the faith of traditional religious people, and hence they questioned the appropriateness of feminists and feminism. For example, Pari, a self-defined conservative woman, explained the contradictions between feminism and Islam. In her view, women cannot choose whether to wear the *Hijab* in Iran, but must wear it as they live in an Islamic country:

Islam and feminism do not agree with each other. Feminists talk about rights concerning women's bodies, whereas in Islam we do not have this. Feminists do whatever they want but in Islam it is different... We live in an Islamic society so women must wear the *Hijab* as wearing it is an obligation in this country.

Similarly, Saba, who sees herself as a conservative, critiqued feminists for advocating rights related to the body and argued that in Iranian society these are not 'women's issues':

The Iranian society is an Islamic one. People still participate in traditional, religious ceremonies. However, in this context, feminists raise the issues of freedom of sexual relationships and abortion. Feminists must attempt to provide separate and particular public places for women only to be free to take part in different activities such as badminton and volleyball. Feminists don't proceed towards the improvement of women's situation.

The above quotation illustrates a conservative understanding of religion, which is in contrast to individual rights supported by feminists. In addition, Saba's quotation suggests the importance of morality for her, to the extent that she called for separate public spaces for men and women for certain activities. This idea is supported by most conservative participants. In the next chapter, I will discuss how this idea influenced conservative interviewees to advocate particular jobs for women to contribute to separate spaces and upholding 'morality' in society.

A few conservative women also problematise feminists as they argued that feminists consider women as weaker human beings. For example, Touran, a self-defined conservative woman, discussed her construction of feminists. She believed that feminists perceive women as weaker individuals in society:

I think being a woman does not mean that you differentiate yourself from society, as feminists do. Feminist activists see women as the weaker individuals in society.

She continued:

I do not believe this is true and I believe a man and woman are a body alongside each other. I do not doubt that women are strong beings because they can become pregnant and carry that child for nine months, then raise that child, which is the hardest job in the world.

As discussed, the analysis of the interviews suggests that there is, for conservatives, an association of feminists with the West, secularity, and individual rights, which might explain why conservative women distanced themselves from the feminist label. It is important to mention that while conservative female activists questioned feminists, analysis of the interviews illustrates that growing numbers of feminists in Iran, particularly after Khatami's time, has motivated the majority of conservative participants to enter and work in the field of women's rights. Parveneh, as a self-defined conservative woman, explained that feminists have been beneficial as they have encouraged religious individuals to think about women's issues in the framework of Islam:

When I was a university student, during the presidency of Khatami, there were some issues regarding women which caused me to get involved in the women's issues field. There were some issues regarding women which made us consider what our solution and roles could be. These encouraged us to become active in this field. There are some needs that feminists raise and we do not concur with their solutions to them... In my opinion, being a female activist means expressing women's needs, not other [Western] women's needs. One of my friends wrote an online blog about the influence Islam and feminism have on each other. I think feminists and Islamic feminists have triggered religious people into thinking about women's issues.

This implies that while a few women, mostly conservatives, questioned feminists, the activities of feminists had a positive impact on religious conservative women to seek

and contribute to women's issues. Similarly, Ahmadi (2006) in her study *Islamic feminism in Iran: Feminism in a new Islamic context* mentioned the same point. She argued that due to the involvement of Islamic feminists with Islamic texts and the input of clerical scholars, conservative women were inspired to publish journals related to women. This suggests that the ways in which conservative women criticise feminists and their issues led them to develop forms of local activism. As discussed in this section, all conservative women distanced themselves from feminist women as they associate feminists with certain problematic issues. Having discussed the women who questioned feminists, in the next section I explain how some women prefer not to be labelled *in public* as feminists, either secular or Muslim.

Avoiding being labelled as feminist

Analysis of the women's accounts illustrated that some religious reformist participants, despite their personal beliefs, avoided being labelled as either feminists or Islamic feminists. They believed these labels, which can be self-applied or applied by others, might cause some limitations that would either hinder their activities or be dangerous for them. These women talked about the local constraints that feminists have been faced with in Iran. The majority of reformist women had been engaged with politics and they talked specifically about the constraints that exist within the political sphere. They argued that the label 'feminist' leads to being stigmatised. In addition, a few of the religious reformist women who preferred not to be labelled as feminists talked about the fear of being sent to prison. The participants raised the issue of restrictions, such as limitations within the political arena, stigma, difficult gender politics, and prison, as home-grown responses of Iranian politics by political leaders who see 'feminism' as being imported to Iran.

A considerable number of women, who despite their beliefs avoided being labelled as feminists, had political experience and defined themselves as religious women rights activists. These reformist religious women played a significant role in the Iranian Islamic Revolution (1979), and emphasised that they became women activists when they felt that revolutionary processes could not improve women's status, and so they

started defending women's rights. Religious reformist women rights²⁶ activists emerged in the late twentieth century in Iran (Ahmadi, 2006; Badran, 2005). They questioned the traditional and male interpretation of the Quran, as applied by conservative religious leaders, which has been practised since the Islamic revolution and caused discriminatory legal codes in Iran. Analysis of these women's accounts suggests how the sense of pain around women's issues after the Islamic revolution was significant enough for them to become women's rights activists. As discussed in Chapter Two, they had signed up for the revolution with the sense that change in the political system would improve women's status. However, over time they said that they realised that women's situation had worsened and therefore they started dealing with women's issues differently. For example, Maria, a self-defined religious women rights activist, illustrated how she was motivated by women's issues such as women's access to political power in order to become a female activist. She explained how after the Revolution Iran was highly gendered:

I became a women's rights activist because the political participation of women was very important to me. In fact, our (reformists) main aim was to reach democracy because we saw the society after the revolution as a dictatorship in which the society was highly gendered.

As reformist women disagreed with the conservatives' perspective, which is based on a traditional interpretation of Quran, most religious reformist participants talked about how they supported Khatami as a religious reformist leader to improve women's rights. Since reformist leaders such as Khatami believe in reforming society and have a more flexible interpretation of the Quran, these participants advocated for reformists to come to power. For example, Maria went on to discuss how reformist Muslim women, who played an important role in the Islamic revolution, demanded changes in the political system through the religious-political leader, Khatami, the President of Iran:

We started the Islamic revolution but after a while we realised that the direction was changing so we had to do something to reform the country. Women played an important role in Mr. Khatami becoming president and, therefore, we had high expectations from him to include women in the

²⁶ In contrast with this study, most of the literature applies the term Islamic feminists rather than religious reformist women activists. However, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Three I believe the term religious reformist women activists is more appropriate.

political sphere.

In important research by Rostami Povey (2001: 48), she argues that by the late 1980s existing religious women rights activists 'gradually changed their position in relation to their men-folk and to the state that they had given their support to in the previous period'. Although her research emphasised the changing loyalty of religious women's rights activists to the state, particularly conservative politicians, she did not examine in detail the strategies that religious women applied to defend women's rights.

Analysis of women's accounts in this study illustrates that while they changed their loyalty to the state, they supported Khatami as a reformist politician as a strategy to advocate women's rights. Having a reformist politician allowed them to discuss women's rights with these leaders using the language of reform. In addition, engaging with a reformist approach enabled religious reformist women to advocate women's rights.

The analysis of the interviews and the existing literature about the progress of women during Khatami's time illustrates that improvements for women were noticeable during this time. The number of Iranian women in parliament increased from four in the first term to thirteen in the sixth parliament of the Khatami period (Shojaee, 2005). The majority of women participants who did not label themselves as feminist, despite their feelings, were women politicians during Khatami's time. While these women could access the political sphere during Khatami's time, they experienced a patriarchal structure in this arena. These participants described how they needed to be cautious to avoid being excluded, and two different factors especially impacted on the limitation these women activists faced in the political domain. Firstly, even during Khatami's time, the role of conservative males in parliament and within the state was important (see also Chapter Two). Secondly, while Khatami's policies placed fewer limitations on women's rights activism, there were some male reformists politicians who, despite their support for reforming society and religion, might not have been in full agreement with feminists and women's rights activists. For, example, some of the women politicians explained how they applied the ideology of reformism in order to convince male reformists to agree with them. For example, Maria stated:

Reformist women have been attempting to convince reformist men to view women's rights in a reformist process. This is an attempt to change their view regarding women. We tried to educate them and argued that they did not realise the gender issues and are blind towards them. During the reformists' time, we had courses for men regarding gender issues so they could understand and appreciate them. However, there were a few of the men that didn't require this, such as my husband, who is a feminist.

This quotation suggests that while the male reformists' view was more open to engage with gender questions, in the view of the reformist women who were politicians, most of these men did not advocate women's rights. This is also illustrated by a small number of studies which note the positive influence of the Islamic revolution on Muslim women particularly. For example, Mir-Hosseini, in both her earlier (1996) and recent studies (2015), argued that the Islamic Revolution was influential in creating indigenous local women activists, particularly after Khatami's presidency. The approach of these women was to work in the patriarchal structure, within which they needed to negotiate with reformist politicians about women's rights. They were unable to discuss these issues with conservative politicians (Chapter Two). The discouraging atmosphere particularly among conservative politician within the political arena, which was their work place, might partly explain why these women avoided calling themselves feminists, or even sometimes women's rights activists. The comments of these women illustrate how, in their view, the realpolitik of what is possible in Iran was incompatible with explicitly advocating feminist ideas. For example, Nahal, as a self-defined religious women's rights activist, and who personally believed in Muslim feminism and was an MP during the reformist time, talked about her experiences of how in parliament her voice could be undermined if she supported women's issues. She explained how discussing women's issues in the political arena stigmatised her, and therefore she had to be more cautious and realistic:

When you speak out about women's issues you are excluded. I am known in my own field. People respect my views and opinions, as an educated expert. However, once I mention women's issues, I am segregated and I am instantly asked, 'you too, are talking about women's issues?' Men, in particular, are not accepting of a woman such as myself, who is well known academically, to speak out on women's issues. We should pay attention to the reality of our society.

This account shows how being undermined and stigmatised, due to being labelled either women's rights activist or feminist, may have an impact on women who personally believe in feminism; because of this, they not only distance themselves from the label of feminist both in political and public arenas, they also restrict their demands and needs.

The majority of women who were politicians talked about how the terms feminist and feminism are stigmatised by male conservative political leaders, and the fear of being stigmatised within the political arena clearly was an important concern for them. As discussed in Chapter Two, religious conservative leaders have historically stigmatised feminists as Western in Iran. In addition, as discussed earlier in this chapter, conservative respondents questioned feminism as a Western concept, which might suggest this creates stigma to some degree. In terms of stigmatisation by male conservative political leaders, joining the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for example has been rejected by these leaders, as they believe that CEDAW is incompatible with Islamic society (discussed further in Chapter Six). Therefore, in this context, Iranian feminists who attempt to advocate women's rights are often accused of importing a foreign ideology (Ahmadi, 2006). Some religious reformist women and even one conservative participant who had been engaged with politics, talked about how this stigmatisation influences their activities. For example, Sara viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, but avoided being labelled a feminist because the word in the context of Iran might be interpreted as 'a Western thought'; therefore, she called herself a women's rights activist rather than a feminist activist:

Studying in law and also facing some problems of marriage caused me to become a feminist activist. Well, I need to say if we use the word feminist here we would be told that if you are feminist you are linked to Western thoughts. Therefore, we use the term women's rights activist.

Zahra, the only self-defined conservative woman who talked about the way she engaged with the stigma around feminists, went further with explanations on how the term feminist is regarded as a controversial concept due to the stigma attached to it as a Western concept:

One of the reasons for our revolution was that the Shah and *Imam*²⁷ Khomeini followed different policies. As we were anti-Western, we chose *Imam* Khomeini. As feminism is linked to Western concepts, it has negative connotations. Whenever we touch on the issues of women, the problems become doubled... We had a meeting with the ex-President (Khamenei) years ago, whereby we discussed women's issues in terms of economics, politics, society, and culture. We asked him whether he agrees that women are sometimes oppressed at home, and he said that behind closed doors, there are some issues that must be addressed. We were surprised and thought that if we had said what he said, we would be labelled as feminists, which is not good in the Islamic government.

Zahra explained how before the Islamic revolution she (and other conservatives) disagreed with the West and, as discussed in Chapter Two, this disagreement stemmed from an anti-colonisation stance. She believed that feminism was a Western concept from which it was important to remain distant. The anti-west ideology was important to her, but raised problems for how she can engage with women's rights. She expressed how 'we were surprised', suggesting that hearing about women's issues from a conservative political leader was unusual, as a woman who talked this way would be labelled a feminist and stigmatised. Zahra further explained that when she became a women's rights activist, she needed to be cautious not to be labelled as a feminist activist:

I am a Muslim woman. When I became a female activist and realised the extent of women's issues, I thought I have to do something. However, we were labelled as feminists by men and religious friends when we tried to give our argument. Being called a feminist means that you shouldn't say anything as you are reflecting the needs of Western women.

In Zahra's account, the fear of this stigma is important to the extent that she preferred to be silent regarding some women's issues. This fear is significant as it suggests that the fear of stigma for women, particularly women in politics, led them to monitor themselves and in some instances to be silent. This suggests the effects of stigma are to govern and control women's activism in such a way that it can close down local activism.

²⁷ The name of an Islamic leadership position or the title of a mosque leader.

In Chapter Five, it is discussed that the priority of these politically experienced religious women activists is not equal rights and gender equality. The majority of these women, despite their beliefs in equal rights, applied the term justice to avoid echoing other Iranian feminists' demands. This illustrates how their position within the political arena influences the way they express themselves and advocate for women's rights. Nahal, a religious ex-MP, believed in equality between men and women but could not express this belief. Instead she applied the term 'justice'. Nahal explained about the resistance of political leaders to feminists' demands:

The view of the Quran, on women, is a humane and equal one. Fortunately, from the perspective of religious leaders, women are seen as equal humans. However, in their view as the starting point of the equality movement between men and women [supported by feminists] started from the west, and came with some undesirable issues such as freedom of sexual relationship [out of marriage], there is a resistance to such a movement in Iran as they feared that the same issues may arise. Therefore, within the political arena we should say that we defend justice.

This shows how these women, despite their personal beliefs, believe they need to detach themselves not only from the feminist *label*, but also some feminist *demands*. Moreover, she clarifies how within the political sphere the notion that 'equality' is supported by 'feminists' is stigmatised by political leaders. As in these leaders' views, Nahal argued, feminist is associated with the 'West' and certain problematic issues such as 'freedom of sexual relationship [out of marriage]'. This would suggest that what Western feminism is associated with can be used against some religious reformists women, and led them to distance themselves from the label of feminist and constrained how they expressed women's needs.

Another reason why a few religious reformist women, who had not engaged with politics, rejected the label of feminist is rooted in their fear of the realpolitik of Iran. These participants distanced themselves from being labelled (either by themselves or others) as feminist because they feared being sent to prison due to taking part in feminist activities. As discussed earlier, the Islamic government in Iran considers feminist activities to be political activities associated with 'Western' perspectives,

which might challenge the power structure of the government. Importantly, the limitation and restrictions for women activists have been varied during reformist and conservative times. The two different understandings of Islam by conservatives and reformists have led to the adoption of different positions regarding feminist activities (Chapter Two). While reformist leaders have been more flexible with feminist activities, conservative politicians are opposed to these activities and limit them. In the conservative view, men and women have different roles and responsibilities due to their God-given differences in terms of both psychology and biology. This conservative conviction derives from their inflexible interpretation of Islam, and means they consider feminists people who challenge the legitimacy of the gender policy within the Islamic state.

As discussed in Chapter Two, different understandings of religion among religious leaders and people in power in Iran have created a system that contains disagreements in terms of adopting united policies on women's rights. For example, Rouhani, a moderate president of Iran (2003-till now), agreed that Iran can join the Leading Education 2030 of UNESCO.²⁸ However, *The Supreme Leader* of Iran declared that this programme is against the principles of Islam and is therefore not accepted in Iran. One of the aims of this programme is gender equality, which in the conservatives' view is against Islam's principles²⁹. Within this context there are no fixed regulations and laws that forbid activities in which feminists defend gender equality (due to the disagreements among political and religious leaders); however, there are many examples that show the danger that feminists face in Iran. For example, eight people were accused and arrested due to 'advertising feminism and standing against the state' in a book shop in Andimeshk³⁰ during Rouhani's presidency. In another example from Povey (2001), she explained how feminists spent two months in prison after attending a conference on 'Iran After the Elections' in Berlin. They were accused by the state of criticising religious domination of the civil law in Iran, when they argued

²⁸ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a universal and aspirational agenda to eliminate poverty through sustainable development by 2030. It has seventeen goals and the international community recognises that education is crucial for the success of these goals. Gender equality is one of its seventeen aims.

²⁹ See the following website: <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4796/Iran-won-t-submit-to-agendas-like-UNESCO-2030-Ayatollah-Khamenei>

³⁰ See the following website: <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php/news1/69510/>

that the role of religion in civil law is a threat to Iranian women's rights and gender equality. These examples illustrate how feminist activities can be seen as a 'non-Islamic' activity that challenges the power structure of the Islamic state. In this study, a few religious reformists rejected being labelled as a feminist and reflected on how the activities of feminists in the public sphere would be questioned by the state. These women insisted that they are religious women's rights activists rather than feminists and they spoke of how being labelled as a feminist could threaten them. This view was expressed by Donya, who avoided being labelled a feminist due to the current political system. As a writer and academic, Donya stated that she should be cautious about her activities and move within certain boundaries:

Feminist ideas are irrational; those who are feminists in Iran run into trouble with the government and political sphere...My work is about the historical studies of women; I cannot do anything else but I have always tried to help within my own ability without overstepping the boundaries. This enabled me to help without getting in trouble with politics.

Similarly, Mahsa, a poet and a self-identified religious women's rights activist, talked about the dangerous situation facing Iranian feminists:

As women's rights activists we must be cautious; we must neither paint extreme caricatures to risk imprisonment, and nor should we stay silent. We must defend women's rights slowly and consistently with caution. We must be very careful in our writing and speaking to avoid being imprisoned for political reasons. At the same time, we should raise people's awareness.

The above quotations demonstrate how boundaries defined by the state can limit women's activities and suggest how these boundaries influence women, encouraging them to be careful and distance themselves from the label of being 'feminist'. Also, as both Donya and Mahsa are public figures, they are more likely afraid to be in the government's eye in comparison to women with a less public profile. Both Donya and Mahsa labelled themselves as women's rights activists, which is more acceptable compared with the label of 'feminist' from a conservatives' viewpoint. It will be discussed later how Iranian secular feminist activists argue that women's problems derive from Islamic laws, calling for a separation of politics and Islam. By contrast, women's rights activists in Iran are able to claim that their activities do not oppose Islamic criteria, and their remarks and activities are tolerated by the state provided

that they do not pose a direct challenge to Islamic values uphold by the state.

For some of the religious reformist women who were interviewed, being labelled feminist is problematic due to the limited context for gender politics of Iran, and therefore these participants distanced themselves from this term. However, their detachment from the term feminist has been ignored in a number of studies (e.g. Povey, 2001; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008) and the differences between being women's rights activists and feminists have not been considered. Ahmadi (2006), in her study of Islamic feminism in Iran, acknowledged that she labelled Muslim Women Islamic feminists, whether they identify themselves as Islamic feminists or not. In contrast my study explores how and why women question feminism and point to the specific issues related to them. This is important in order to analyse the different reasons for the rejection of the terms of feminist and feminism. While most conservative and some religious reformist women avoided being labelled feminist, in the next section I discuss the position of women who do identify themselves as secular and Islamic feminists.

Defining oneself as a feminist

Despite the risks discussed above, the majority of participants, mostly secular and religious reformist women, did label themselves as feminist. In this research, all secular women defined themselves as secular feminists; however, some religious reformist women preferred to be called an 'Islamic feminist' rather than a 'secular feminist', arguing that they defend women's rights within the framework of Islam. Analysis of the interviews illustrates that all women who called themselves secular feminists defended secularity, while Islamic feminists argued that religion with different interpretations should be based on the legal codes of the civil state. As discussed earlier, the terms feminist and feminism are problematic, particularly from the conservative leaders' viewpoint, and the stigma of being labelled as such is also experienced by Islamic feminists, but to a lesser extent.

The women applied various strategies to work at lowering the risks associate with

labelling oneself a ‘feminist’. For example, as discussed further in Chapter Five, they avoided prioritising the right to choose to wear the *Hijab* and gay rights, due to the sensitivity of politics around these issues. Another strategy that these women talked about relates to their attempt to reduce the risks involved in feminist activities by changing their visibility at different times. As discussed throughout this thesis, reformist religious leaders are more flexible than conservatives in terms of women’s rights. Therefore, the risk that the feminists faced varied during the reformist and conservative era. Most of the women talked about how during the reformist time they were more active and visible in the public sphere, but during the conservative period they avoided being observed in the public sphere. For example, Neda, a self-defined feminist, and the founder and publisher of magazines related to women’s issues, talked about the time that she re-opened the women’s journal, during Rouhani’s time (See Table 1, P: 11-12), which had been closed during Ahmadi Nejad’s presidency. Neda stated:

I come back after Rouhani and start publishing women’s journal with all economic problems after six years from closing of it.

With difficulty and hesitation, she responded to the question of why the journal was closed:

Because we presented women’s problems as we are doing now. We were told by the system that you demonstrate women’s position in a bad way, but it is not true. We wrote about positive points and introduced successful women as well. I think the notion in which men say we are living in this way and you should not ruin it made us close it six years ago.

In the same vein, Rounak, a self-defined Islamic feminist, echoed the same point:

You cannot say that women did not have feminist activities during Ahmadi Nejad’s time. In fact, they did but they were underground. They became visible again in Rouhani’s presidency. Who knows they might go to underground in future again. It depends on the political situation.

The above quotations suggest that most women managed the visibility of feminist activities during both conservative and reformist time as a strategy to reduce the risk with which they were faced. While this study did not explore the extent to which

participants used virtual space for their feminist activities, studies such as Hoodfar and Sadr (2010), Shirazi (2012), and Abbasgholizadeh (2014) suggest that Iranian feminists deal with the risk that threatened them during the conservative time by taking their activities into cyberspace. They argue that feminists in Iran have demonstrated how to utilise virtual space for women's movements under authoritarian regimes, in the context of the repression of civil society and restricted public spaces.

Notably, appearing in public spaces during the reformist time does not mean that feminists were not under pressure and could entirely protect themselves from politics of gender. As discussed earlier, some examples show how feminists were arrested even in the reformist era. This suggests that while Iranian feminists applied some strategies to protect themselves, they were still taking risks to fight for their commitment to feminism. Similarly, several authors (Moghissi, 1999; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008) have argued that while feminist activities can be ideologically unacceptable in the eyes of the state, the reality of women's lives is not in accordance with what the state prescribes and is much less limited than the Islamic government demands. Iranian women, whether secular or Muslim, have 'spared no effort to win back, inch by inch, the grounds which they lost through 're-Islamisation' policies in Iran' (Moghissi, 1999: 11). These women, as Ahmadi (2006) argues, put their lives, families and careers in danger to advocate for women's rights.

Analysis of the background of the participants illustrates that the majority of women who called themselves feminists (28 women), either secular or Muslim, were educated academics or journalists whose work related to women's issues. Importantly, they were involved in a variety of feminist meetings organised by their networks. These participants construct the term feminism as a set of ideas that enables them to defend equality between men and women and improve Iranian women's position. Additionally, the majority of respondents who labelled themselves as either feminist or Islamic feminist were of the view that the ideas of feminism improved their conditions in different ways. According to these participants' accounts, the body of feminist ideas was influential in reaching awareness of women's rights and gender issues. For example, Alice, a self-defined secular feminist, who was Kurdish and

suffered from financial problems, believed that she faced issues in her family life due to her lack of knowledge regarding her rights. She stated that feminist views helped her to become aware of these issues:

After being introduced to feminism, I became familiar with women's rights and I realised the oppression I had faced. The house I lived in was paid for mostly by myself but it was in my husband's name. After 24 years of marriage, I have nothing. I did not even pick my children's names. However, if I had been familiar with feminism at that time, I would never have allowed this.

Similarly, Monica, a self-defining secular academic feminist who was socialist, argued that feminist ideas enabled her to live free from gender norms in society. Also, as a socialist, she explained how her commitment to socialism could sometimes limit her as a woman, yet the idea of feminism supported her to feel freer:

I understood that some of my problems could be solved through the knowledge I have read about feminism. In England, I could go to the cinema on Saturday nights without any problem, whereas I could not do it in Iran because of feeling insecure going to the cinema at night. I could go to a gay club with someone. I needed to be connected with something like a feminist group... in an Iranian cinema we were told by left-Marxists that if a boy wanted to touch your hand you should hold his hand and tell him your hand is not different from mine, and therefore watch your film. But I did not like to do that; I wanted to watch the film comfortably on my own.

She went on to say:

I remembered in Italy feminists lay down on the grass in the street and it was one of my dreams to do it. One of the reasons that I participated in the Islamic Revolution of Iran was to reach the dream that you could go outside with the same clothes as you wear at home, and also that you could lie down on the grass in the street and no one would bother you.

Monica, as one of the advocates of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, argued that she had participated in the revolution as she was seeking freedom for women. However, later she changed her strategy and became a secular feminist to defend women's rights. As discussed earlier, some women politicians detached themselves from the label of feminism and argued that they participated in the Islamic Revolution to improve women's situation, but later their ideas and strategies changed. This

suggests how the sense of pain around women's issues motivated participants to take different strategies based on their background, such as being secular, religious or a politician, to defend women's rights.

The term feminism, for the majority of women who preferred to be labelled as either feminist or Islamic feminist, is typically constructed as a set of ideas that enables them to improve not only their own situation but also that of other Iranian women. Feminist views for Haleh, Parastoo and Sousan meant having a better lifestyle, the empowerment of women, and positive feelings due to helping other women. For Haleh, as a self-defined secular feminist, feminism is a tool for thinking that gives women and men the possibility to have a better life where they both can live in a society with justice:

For me, the idea of feminism was a means to recognise my society. With feminism, I wanted there to be justice, for men and women to have a better life together and to alter the inequalities concerning rights, politics, and economics.

In Parastoo's ideas, feminism is a tool through which women would be empowered to stand against discrimination and violence. Parastoo identified herself as a secular feminist who had worked in NGOs that attempted to empower women, but which had closed and re-opened several times, due to the political issues. She talked about her experiences and different examples in the past that motivated her to become a feminist to combat discrimination:

The reason I became a feminist was to fight discrimination and violence. Discrimination is a huge term, maybe it is better to say removal of violence as it is more compatible with my spirit. One of the reasons I am more concerned about violence is my mother and sister. Also, in our neighbourhood I witnessed at least two deaths of my friends due to violence. One of my friends was thrown down the stairs by her husband when she got pregnant at sixteen years old. Another, a friend of mine and my sister, she committed self-immolation.

Moreover, Sousan, who viewed herself as a secular feminist, was also a journalist who had the opportunity to live in the Netherlands several years ago, but returned to Iran to be an active feminist and to work to improve women's conditions there. She

believed that being a feminist enables her to have a better and more positive feeling about herself; through feminist activities she can help oppressed women:

I feel better about myself being a feminist and I feel as though I am useful. There is oppression and there are some people who are unaware of their rights. This is the reason why I am living in Iran, to change this country and this gives me a feeling of satisfaction.

The respondents' accounts suggest how participants who identified as feminists considered the Iranian context for defending women's rights. As I will discuss in the next chapter, feminist participants attempted to prioritise some rights that can be applicable in Iran. Their positions and priorities challenges the view that considers feminists as only Western.

Within the group of the women who viewed themselves as feminists, there were a few who, despite calling themselves feminists, said they preferred to call themselves Islamic feminists (10 women) when they were asked whether they considered themselves secular or Islamic feminists. Their preference was justified in terms of advocating women's rights within the framework of Islam. As religion plays an important role in Iranian political and legal systems, calling oneself a secular or Islamic feminist has an influence on the strategies that these women employ to defend women's rights.

The association between the secular feminists and secularity will be discussed in the next section, but the reason I mention it here is that advocating secularism is highly controversial in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Pointing to this now permits a view of the wider picture in order to understand the positions of Iranian feminists explained in this section. As the study of Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2008) suggests, Iranian secular-oriented feminism views Iranian women's problems as a result of the merging of politics and Islam in Iran. Solving women's problems, from their point of view, depends on the separation of Islam from the state and its legal codes.

According to the analysis of interviews, secular and Islamic feminists in Iran share some similar aims (Najmabadi, 1998, Ahmadi 2006, Tohidi, 2016); however, they have different sources for advocating women's rights. All of the participants defining themselves as secular feminists avoided using Islamic sources to fight for women's rights and interests, while self-defined Islamic feminists used the framework of Islam. For example, Shabnam, who viewed herself as an Islamic feminist, said that:

They are a group of feminists who call themselves secular because another group calls itself Muslim. However, secular feminists are religious unconsciously. But I believe that secular feminists want women's rights to be in the framework of human rights not in Islam or the Quran's framework.

Likewise, the literature (e.g. Mir-Hosseini, 1996, Badran, 2002, Ahmadi, 2006, Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006, Tohidi, 2016, Mir-Hosseini, 2015) show that secular and Islamic feminists have different sources and strategies to improve women's rights. In terms of Islamic feminists, the analysis of the women's accounts in this study illustrates that some religious reformist women called themselves Islamic feminists. Most of these women believed that there was compatibility between their two 'faiths': being Muslim and being feminist. This suggests that for these women applying the reinterpretation of the Quran played a key role in reconciling their beliefs in feminism and Islam and also allowed religious reformist participants to advocate women's rights and identify themselves as feminists. For example, for Lida, who viewed herself as an Islamic feminist, a different reading of Islam enabled her to connect her two commitments:

While I was studying, I began working and I was passionate about learning about women's issues in law and *Fiqh* and educating the public about these issues. When I became familiar with different interpretations of Islam, I was pleased to find that Islam is not set in stone, as I had always been told. Therefore, through my journalism, I was very excited to inform people about what I had found out.

Similarly, some Iranian authors such as Ahmadi (2006) and Mir-Hosseini (2015) have argued that Islamic feminists attempt to reconstruct Islamic and gender discourse. This reconstruction is significant in shaping their identity as both a Muslim woman and a feminist. As Islamic feminists' approach to gender is through a religious framework, they may be less likely to be accused of connecting with Western ideas by

the state compared with feminists who advocate secularism. As Ahmadi (2006) argues, despite the importance of secular women activists in Iran, who contributed to the contest against religious leaders' efforts to deprive Iranian women of their rights, their struggle has been neither broad nor adequate enough to change the religious structure and discriminatory laws. In her view, these activists who are both religious and feminist have more space to pursue feminist goals. In fact, secular feminists face barriers within the framework of an Islamic state, where the conservatives hold a very powerful position in certain state institutions. However, religious reformist women, including Islamic feminists, played a role in being an inside force that has attempted to reconstruct Islamic and gender discourses. As discussed throughout this thesis, it is notable that this does not mean that Islamic feminists can freely defend women's rights.

Analysis of the women's accounts revealed that a small number of religious reformist women (three participants) preferred to be labelled as neither secular nor Islamic feminists, but rather they called themselves as feminists only, with no specific position related to secularism or Islam. However, these women are recognised by other women activists³¹ as Islamic feminists and additionally during the interview they defended the idea that the Quran should be interpreted in a more egalitarian way. These women are journalists, founders and publishers of famous magazines, and they need to work with both secular feminists and Islamic feminists. Their networks and jobs might partly explain why they preferred not to be associated with a particular category. In Neda's view, not only is affiliation among women activists important, but also, to negotiate women's needs with the parliament within the Islamic framework, activists should avoid labelling themselves as secular:

I think these divisions (secular and religious feminists) not only do not help, but disperse women's rights activists. There were some feminists who divided women to secular and religious, but after a while they realised they were wrong. These feminists have even attempted to be closer to the government as they found there is no other option for us except having a

³¹ As I used snowball sampling, my gate keepers/participants labelled these women as either secular or religious feminists and connected me to them. However, during interviews these women identified themselves as only feminists.

discussion with the government [...] If we imagine feminism as a train, we should not put people off who pray and read the Quran, instead we can get more people into the train.

As discussed in this section, most conservative participants raised issues related to feminists and feminism, which explains why in their view it does not work in the Iranian context. They spoke about how feminist issues are associated with Western women and are not applicable in Iran. Also, the connection between feminism and secularism in their view is problematic in an Islamic country. They discussed the particularity of certain situations of Iran that are incompatible with the way that feminists advocate women's rights. Their hesitancy around rights advocated by feminists encouraged them to be local and particular activists and discouraged them from appealing to broader sisterhood rights. In addition, the critique of feminists and feminism raised by conservative women revealed a stigma that has a negative impact on their solidarity with Iranian feminists. Importantly, some religious reformists, some of whom were politicians and some not, avoided using the language of feminism despite their real beliefs and identities. Women who were politicians talked about their fears of being stigmatised within the political sphere and a few religious reformists raised the fear of prison. In contrast to these participants, the majority of interviewees, most of whom were secular and religious reformists, labelled themselves as feminists or Islamic feminists. However, their activities were limited due to existing difficulties in gender politics in Iran. As discussed in this section, women take different positions in terms of using the label of feminist. These positions are significant as it seems that they play an important role in their activities and the ways that they express themselves. In the next section, I will explore how these positions influence women's ideas about the changes they sought to reach a more egalitarian society.

Change linked to moving into a more egalitarian society

This section examines women's views about the changes needed to reach a fairer society. As discussed in the previous section, women's positions in relation to the terms feminist and feminism are different. This section explores how these positions link to the women's perceptions about how they should call for this change. Analysis

of the data shows that three main suggestions were raised by women activists: a secular state, reinterpreting the Quran, and an Islamic government. In fact, the participants proposed different arguments that are primarily about the principles of a fair society: human rights and rights in the framework of religion. I will first examine feminists' views about a secular state and human rights as its components.

Secular women and calling for a secular state

Almost all secular participants (15 women) believed that the state and religion should be separated. These women argued that legal codes need to be in accordance with human rights rather than the Islamic framework. They perceived human rights as a better framework than religion, which maintains a cultural bias toward men. In other words, the majority of the women (if not all) who called themselves a secular feminist believed that a more egalitarian society would be achieved if women's rights and legal codes are separated from religion and in accordance with human rights. They do not give legitimacy to religion to form laws because they argue that women's rights were overlooked in all religions, as illustrated by Parastoo, a self-defined secular feminist activist:

I prefer laws according to human rights... I am not so familiar with the Quran, but I think since all religions have been created in a patriarchal period, they are all somehow patriarchal. All religious books which have been written and also all things which are against women in the Quran have their roots in Judaism and it seems Islam is not a unique religion.

Parastoo believes that patriarchy influenced religion, and therefore women's rights are not considered within them. Similarly, Gita, a self-identified secular feminist, mentioned that although women have a choice about some responsibilities, they are stripped of women's rights in the Quran. She also pointed to human rights as a logical and reasonable criteria for women's rights:

In all religions man has been addressed and generally human is regarded as man especially in languages where male and female are distinguished. Even though Quran's *Ahkam* gave dignity for women such as stating that a woman is not supposed to bring up child or do housework and if she does she can be paid for this by her husband . But, everything is based on this philosophy that a woman is deprived of any rights when she gets married. We [secular

feminists] believe it is better to talk more about human rights which is logical and reasonable.

The importance of human rights as a way of advancing Iranian women's rights was also echoed by Haleh, who saw herself as a secular feminist and advocated human rights as the best basis for achieving women's rights:

I believe that one of the best resources for women's rights is human rights. In the Islamic state my priority might not be to defend homosexual rights, despite my personal beliefs, as I prefer to defend issues concerning a broader spectrum of people, which are at lower risk.

The above quotes illustrate how all secular participants avoided defining women's rights within the framework of religion, preferring human rights instead. Human rights for these secular participants were considered as protection for women's rights. Also, Haleh's view about the possibility of homosexual rights in the Iranian context suggests that whereas secular feminists believe in human rights, they are still particular about what will be prioritised. The ideas of all secular participants appear to suggest that in the Iranian context human rights would work better, rather than claims to recognise rights in the framework of Islam. Similarly, many researchers have argued that both secular and religious reformist women/feminist activists advocate human rights (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016), but in different ways. In the next section, I will explore how participants with religious-based views seek change in order to advocate women's rights.

Reformist women and more egalitarian interpretation of religion

Analysis of participants' accounts demonstrated that all the religious reformist women in this research, including all those who identified themselves as feminist/Islamic feminist and as religious women's rights activists, argued that women's rights should be reinterpreted in the framework of religion. Importantly, these women also supported human rights, but to a different extent. These participants support the idea of reinterpreting the Quran in accordance with the consideration of women's views and contextualisation of Islamic resources. These women pointed to the temporality of the Quran's explanation, historical context, and women friendly interpretations.

Analysis of the data revealed two different approaches to the reinterpretation of the Quran. While a few of the religious reformist women argued that women need the right to interpretation, most religious reformists argued that male religious leaders should reinterpret the Quran in a more women friendly way. For example, Hadis, a religious reformist feminist, echoed the idea that women should have the right to reinterpret the Quran. She reported that the testimony of two women is equal to that of a man. For her, this was only meaningful at the time the Quran appeared, and she mentioned how an ‘updated interpretation of Islam, religion and the Quran by both men and women’ can have an influence on democracy:

The Quran is a text which has its own meaning in its own context... there are matters in the Quran which are based on that time and place, for example the Quran does not say that the testimony of two women is equal to the testimony of one man, it is not possible for all periods. It has been true in its context, in its own time and place, but you cannot generalise it to all times and places...democracy can be possible through an updated interpretation of Islam, religion and the Quran by both men and women. Women must be involved in verses related to them. Women must [be] present in legislating laws related to them. Men cannot determine for women what they are allowed to do and what they are not.

The above extract illustrates how a few religious reformists argued that women should have the right to reinterpret the Quran and this right should not only be limited to men. However, most religious reformists did not take this view and stated that religious leaders should reinterpret the Quran. As most religious leaders are male,³² these women did not question that male position as the only interpreter of Islam. Instead, they urged these male leaders to re-read the Quran in more egalitarian ways. For example, Simin, a participant who defined herself as a religious women’s rights activist, believed that *Mojtahedin* (religious leaders), who are ‘experts in Islam’, should reinterpret the Quran. For Simin, the ‘True meaning of Islam’ from her point of view should be introduced by *Mojtahedin* who do *Ijtihad*, which is about the making of an independent verdict within Islamic law by personal effort. She questioned the current understanding of Islam and called for the interpretation of

³² The lack of women in the role of interpreting Islam in Iran comes from the male religious leaders’ views that there are some biological differences between men and women that leads them to have distinct roles. Being a leader, particularly in the religious sphere, is therefore only attributed to men in Iran.

Islam to be changed and updated to a version that is free of any discrimination:

The Quran mentions that we must follow Islam depending on the current state of society. In my opinion, if this has not happened up to now, this is the *Mojtahedin*'s fault. In the Quran, we have some principles that must be updated and interpreted according to today's society. I think the religion of Islam is one that is fair and equal. Unfortunately, the Islamic Republic is far from the religion of Islam. It is the responsibility of experts in Islam to intervene and make sure that the Islamic Republic is in accordance with the Islamic principles, which is based on justice and equality, whereby there is no discrimination.

She went on to say:

Now, there are different interpretations of Islam, such as that of the conservatives in Iran, ISIS, the Taliban or Al Qaeda. However, these are just different interpretations because Islam cannot be so varied. Moreover, in my opinion, this is tainting Islam because these groups introduce Islam as a religion of injustice. Therefore, the *Mojtahedin* must portray the true meaning of Islam.

The above quotations suggest how most religious reformist women in this study believed that a more equitable reading of Islam by male religious leaders would lead to greater equality. As discussed in Chapter Two, *Ijtihad* as a religious interpretation might be considered as a tool by which reformists are able to have different understandings of religion. The majority of religious reformist women's rights activists applied the notion that *Ijtihad* enables religious leaders to reinterpret and have different understandings of Islamic texts. The advocacy of the reinterpretation of the Quran by religious leaders comes from preventing women from interpreting religion. Some of the religious reformist participants talked about their limitations in this. For example, Nahal, an interviewee who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, explained how women activists are constrained in the reinterpretation of the Quran due to the notion that women do not have the legal authority in Islam to reinterpret the Quran. Nahal, as an ex-MP, suggested that women activists should refer to reformists' expertise in order to change the traditional reading of Islam:

We must interpret the Quran according to the present day. There are *Ulama* who support this idea. As a female activist, if we fight for the reinterpretation of the Quran, this is a sort of illegal act because we will be told that this is simply our opinion, God has not said this.

This notion partly explained why the majority of religious reformist women supported reformist leaders, such as Khatami (See Table 1, P: 11-12). Applying the strategy of the reinterpretation of Islam has also been illustrated by other researchers examining Iranian women activists (Badran, 2002; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Mohammadi, 2013). These authors focus on the engagement of women activists in the process of the re-interpretation of the Quran. However, these studies have failed to explain the limitations that Muslim women face in their involvement with this process.

While the strategies of reformist leaders have been beneficial for religious reformist women activists who call for reform and a reinterpretation of women's rights, some of these men might not support women's rights. As discussed earlier, there are reformist male politicians who do not support women's demands. However, some religious reformist women explained how they challenged their thought and strategies, asking them to be reformists on women's issues as well. In Maria's view, reformists are questioned by women activists because of their conservative strategies in relation to women's rights:

Some reformist men's views are very similar to that of conservative men. However, we argue with these reformist men as to why they have reformist views regarding socio-political issues, but when it comes to women's issues they have conservative views. By raising these discussions these men became more aware of the gender issues, and this awareness is acquired. For example, looking at a female miner you realise that women have the same abilities as men.

This quotation illustrates the views of some of the religious reformist participants who shared the same strategy of reinterpreting the Quran and working with male reformist politicians in order to improve and reform Iranian women's rights. In other words, having a similar language paved the way for women activists to negotiate with reformist religious leaders to advocate women's rights. Similarly, Mohammadi (2013: 15), in his study on the process of reform in Iran, declared:

Iranian reformists introduce the change in religious practices as a victory for women's movements in Iran where women challenge the traditional male

privileges in politics and in the clergy. The reformist groups who are questioning sharia and its compatibility with the everyday life of Iranians try to present new and different readings of Islam and sharia.

This implies that advocating women's rights in a religious framework enables religious reformist women to have more power in the system, especially in the political sphere, compared with secular feminists. While the religious reformist women advocate reinterpretation of the Quran in a more women friendly way, there are two overlapping views in terms of using human rights as a source of women's rights in Iran. Some of the religious reformists who viewed themselves as religious women's rights activists, despite their agreement with human rights in theory, preferred to work within an Islamic framework in practice to protect certain values that might not be a priority of human rights. However, for other religious reformist participants, who self-identified themselves as feminist/Islamic feminist, the interpretation of the Quran should be based on human rights. Some argued that there is a limitation on applying human rights in Iran, and there are boundaries (see Chapter Six) related to religion that could be threatened by human rights. For example, Simin, a self-defined religious women's rights activist, stated that she did not advocate gay rights, and claimed that although religious reformists are in favour of Islamic government and human rights, in terms of making laws and women rights, they prefer Islam:

In term of women rights in the framework of human rights, I believe Islam itself is rich and it includes many true principles, so we do not need to engage with international conventions. If we practise real Islam, we will be far ahead of those conventions. My thesis was a comparative work between the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and Iran and Islamic law. I did not see any difference. Nothing was found that proves the Convention includes something that does not exist in Islam. My research compared five cases. We have equality in Islam and if somewhere you find inequality it is the responsibility of the *Mojtahed* (the priest) to update interpretations and ensure equality. Unfortunately, it has not happened yet, so we do not have real Islam...I prefer Islam in Iran; however, it does not mean that I do not believe in human rights or other international conventions.

Azin, a self-defined religious women's rights activist, went further and talked about the limitation of human rights in Iran. She argued that she preferred rights in the

framework of Islam as the concept of 'family' is more protected within that:

I agree with human rights but I am more interested in laws according to Islamic rights that are based on the Quran and do not have extremist interpretations and are also in accordance with today's human's needs. I think this is closer to human nature. No one can feel satisfactory without family.

In terms of family rights, she went on to say:

I am sure Islamic rights do not ignore families. Family is the main resource of satisfaction and peace in our society so that women's rights should be based on the regulation of family. Looking for equality without paying attention to family values may lead individuals to be lonely, sad and have lost connection within themselves.

The above quotations illustrate how some religious reformists, including participants identified as women's rights activists, consider human rights in the cultural and religious context in seeking to advance women's rights. It seems that there are some boundaries related to their commitment to their religious faith, which influences their preference for the particularity of religion. However, their agreement with human rights suggests their flexibilities in terms of rights compared with conservative participants.

Despite the preference of some religious reformist women for women's rights in framework of Islam, other religious reformist participants, including self-identified feminist/Islamic feminists, called for human rights. For these participants, women have an 'honoured status' in Islam, but they preferred to reinterpret the Quran in accordance with human rights, within which all people across the world enjoy equality. Fereshteh, who called herself a feminist and during the interview defended religious reformist women, emphasised the high status of women in the Quran and reinterpreting the Quran based on human rights:

I consider women's status in the Quran to be an honoured status. If we presume that Mary is a touchstone. The Quran has confirmed Mary, so we cannot say she did not exist or is imaginary. It is very important that a woman without a husband creates a prophet, and, if you pay attention, there are famous women in all religions. Khadija was a powerful woman and Mohammad married her due to her money and security. Hagar, Abraham's

wife, is the same. If you look at religions carefully, they all are matriarchal. Fatimah was a woman and she had no brother, Mohammad had just one daughter. The family of Islam comes from a woman... I believe in human rights but we should reinterpret the Quran based on human rights. I even do not believe in Islamic human rights. When I say Catholic human rights, then I am against others rights. Therefore, it appears a contradiction in relation to the human rights convention, which means all humans are equal with each other without considering their age, race, religion and gender. Thus, if I say Catholic is superior, there will be a contradiction.

The above extract suggests how, for Fereshteh, human rights work better than rights in the framework of religion. However, she preferred to achieve this by the reinterpretation of the Quran. In fact, she believed that religion should remain in the private sphere. This shows that the advocacy of human rights links to these religious reformists' understanding of rights and religion. In terms of calling for human rights, similarly, many scholars note that both secular and religious reformist women and feminist activists advocate human rights (e.g. Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). However, this study goes further and examined to what extent Muslim feminists and women activists support human rights. The arguments of some religious reformists seem to be more about the practice of politics, and the pragmatism needed to work within Iran, to achieve human rights. These women share the same aim with secular feminists, but through pragmatic arguments they questioned secular feminists and argued that their strategies might not be applicable in Iran. Likewise, Ali (2000) argues that while Islamic feminists and women activists advocate human rights, they are unable to express it explicitly. He states that these women must find a culturally appropriate equivalent of human rights in their own traditions and cultures.

The analysis of the women's accounts suggests that all of the religious reformist participants are pragmatists who adopt different strategies based on what is possible in the Iranian context. For example, Maria, who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, believed that the Quran should be reinterpreted in a more egalitarian way and argued that secular feminists have not been very realistic in terms of women's rights in Iran:

I believe in human rights... I feel that [secular] feminists have not acted very realistically on advocating women's issues in Iran. They have tried to apply

the same strategies to issues present in the West, whereas Western societies differ to that of Iran. We should attempt to solve our problems based on the conditions of Iranian society. In the West, people such as lecturers are greatly looked up to, whereas here in Iran, the influential group in society consists of religious leaders and members of women's religious groups.

According to her account, it seems that avoiding the language of 'secularity' and 'feminism' helps her to be connected with some influential people in the society, such as the clergy and religious women's groups.³³ In a similar vein, some scholars argue that the identity of 'Islamic feminists' as non-secular feminists seems to act as proof of their loyalty to religion within a religious community (e.g. Moghadam, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Mir-Hosseini *et al.*, 2015; Tohidi, 2016). Therefore, the position of 'Muslim's women' as insiders is influential to generate networking and lobbying with religious people in order to lobby for women's rights. This reflects how religious reformist women can be empowered by the term 'Muslim' in order to defend women's rights, and how their strategy of reinterpreting the Quran in a more women friendly way can be considered as an indigenous solution in the Iranian context. Tohidi (2016) argued how women's rights advocates have often felt compelled to show that their quest for women's emancipation comes from their indigenous ideas. Tohidi (2016: 78) stated that these women:

have been carefully navigating between identity politics, a cultural pressure for 'authenticity,' and the quest for national independence on the one hand, and the aspiration for individual rights and universal values such as equality, human rights, freedom of choice, and democracy, on the other.

However, data analysis in this study suggests that religious reformist women take different strategies to prove themselves as indigenous activists. Some apply the interpretation of the Quran based on human rights, while for others it is not only the interpretation of the Quran but also their preference and loyalty to the religious faith rather than human rights.

³³ In Iran, several times a month religious women get together to practise religion. Such a gathering allows religious women activists to educate Iranian religious women about women's rights. With the same religious language, they can make them aware of their rights.

The interpretations of religion and secular feminists

In spite of the ideas of the religious reformist women who claimed that secular feminists' strategies are not applicable in Iran, the majority of secular feminists stated, seemingly with some reluctance, that the interpretation of the Quran can help women's rights in Iran³⁴. They thought this interpretation might be helpful in particular ways. In other words, they do not advocate women's rights in an Islamic framework, but some argued that the interpretation might be influential in communicating with politicians and challenging patriarchal structures. These secular women mentioned that women need to negotiate with politicians using religious language to change discriminatory laws. For example, Sousan, a self-defined secular feminist, despite her beliefs in secularity and the separation of religion from politics, stated that to remove discriminatory laws, women might need to talk to politicians using the language of religion:

I believe that the interpretation of the Quran has helped the process of democratisation. There are some instances in which we must negotiate with politicians and communicate with them on their own terms, from a religious perspective. Women's rights activists who are able to do so are surely able to be influential.

As already discussed, while all religious reformists believed in the interpretation of the Quran to achieve a more egalitarian society, they had two different views to advocate women's rights. For some, the reinterpretation of the Quran would be a means through which women's rights in the framework of Islam could be improved. These women agreed with human rights to the degree that their particular religious values are protected. This justifies their preference for a religious framework rather than human rights. However, other reformist religious women understood human rights as protection, and these women used the interpretation of the Quran as a strategy to re-define women's rights in accordance with human rights. The position of being insiders within the system is significant to the extent that religious reformists' strategy was supported by secular feminists, even if this support was somewhat reluctant. The analysis of participants' accounts also illustrates that while the

³⁴ Their facial expressions during the interviews showed their reluctance.

interpretation of the Quran for all religious reformist women is to consider it a way to reach a fair society, religious conservative women, whose understanding of Islam is less flexible than reformist women, disagreed with the reinterpretation of religion.

Conservative women and the Islamic state without reinterpretation of the Quran

All of the conservative women resisted change in the law and supported Islamic laws. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, these conservative participants critiqued feminists and, for most of them, the association between feminists and secularism was problematic. This was due to the conservatives' view that supports a strong link between the legal system and religion. Additionally, all the conservative interviewees in this study argued that the interpretation of the Quran should be fixed. For example, Zahra, a self-defined conservative participant, stated that the way that the Muslim prophet (Mohammad) and his family (*Ahlebeyt*) and *The Supreme Leader (Valie Faghih)* practised Islam should be the standard for all Muslims:

The Quran should not be interpreted by us, it must always be considered alongside *Ahlebeyt*, which explains the meaning of the Quran. *Ahlebeyt* recognised the Quran better than anyone else. This means that only Ali and those of *Aemmeh*, who had more knowledge about the Quran, can interpret the meaning and we must simply follow them. Everybody makes their own interpretations, for example ISIS claim that they are Muslim on their own understanding of Islam. On the other hand, other individuals believe that Islam must go forward with peace. There must be a standard that can be referred to, we say this standard is *Ahlebeyt*.

Then she went on to say:

Conservatives and reformists are both Shia Muslim, however, we conservatives believe that since *Ahlebeyt* is no longer here, we should follow *Valie Faghih* instead. Reformists do not have the same view and do not support him.

Saba, who viewed herself as a conservative woman, made the same point:

The Quran interprets itself, with verses that explain other verses. It has a systematic way of interpreting itself; each verse should not be interpreted alone because, when put together, this is when the true meaning can be found. Therefore, everything in the Quran is laid out side by side as a package.

Zahra reflected on how ordinary people must follow the prophet, his family, and *The Supreme Leader* as the best standard to understand exactly what the Quran means. Also, in Saba's view, the Quran interprets itself so there is no need for human beings to interpret it. These accounts suggest how the different interpretations of the Quran advocated by reformists, which are more compatible with current issues in society and human rights, are discouraged by conservatives. Contrary to conservative ideas, the role of *The Supreme Leader* within the system is questioned by both male reformist leaders and religious reformist participants (see Chapters Two and Six). The religious reformist participants believed that religious leaders and in some cases women themselves can reinterpret the Quran according to current issues in Iran. These contradictions between religious reformists and conservative participants' views might explain conservatives' arguments (discussed earlier) that reformist religious women are similar to secular feminists. Perhaps the origin of this notion comes from their belief that only their own understanding of Islam is the true understanding. Mir-Hosseini (2002) divides religious clerics into reformists and conservatives, declaring that reformists, unlike the conservatives, support democracy. Conservatives disagreed with the idea that people can have freedom in their lifestyle choices and, for example, choose what to wear. Although her study was about male conservative religious leaders, this research found that conservative female participants also called for an Islamic state without reinterpretation of the Quran, but in a different way. Analysis of the participants' accounts shows that while both male conservative and female conservative participants advocated a society governed by Islam in a traditional way, female conservative participants looked for a type of society in which women's rights can be improved. In this case, conservative women were not fully in agreement with male conservative religious leaders. These women attempted to find a way that enabled them to include women in the current society and public sphere. For example, Pari, who identified herself as a conservative woman, sought a new strategy, which considers women's 'place in society' but in the framework of Islam, not 'Western style':

Interpretations from the Quran are always fixed. We should not be thinking about how to change the interpretation, but rather how to include social issues so that women have their own place in society. Whilst taking religion into consideration, we must determine women's place in society that is

bound to religious principles. We should make a systematic theory for this. We have not had such a theory up to now; we have been copying Western styles, placing religion beside it. However, I believe that religion should dominate and according to this a different policy should be made.

The above quotation appears to suggest a way of dealing with tensions between defending the rights of women and upholding one's faith to a certain understanding of Islam. This tension leads these conservative women into different positions to male conservatives. For example, Pari, an older conservative woman, explained the limitations of two dominant views related to women's issues. Firstly, she criticised feminism, as in her view it advocated women's freedom without any religious and moral framework. Secondly, she questioned the viewpoint that avoids giving women a position in society and assumes that women should stay at home and look after their husband. In addition, she believed that these two notions are very absolute notions and, therefore, the women's issue needs a methodology that is based on religion:

We had an Islamic Revolution, which was political but we need a cultural revolution. For it to be successful, we need a new strategy based on religion but it must have relativity to provide us with a better lifestyle. We had two different viewpoints in society. One sees a woman as detached from society and assumes her as a flower, who must sit in the house and look after her husband. The other [feminism] sees women as free individuals, who are not tied down by religious beliefs. The latter is more practical and is therefore more common in society, but it distances us from our original belief.

Anoosh, a young woman who viewed herself as a conservative participant, reinforced this argument that feminism is not compatible with religious beliefs. She expressed that she became a women's rights activist to solve women's problems *within* the Islamic framework:

In our country, those involved with women's issues know themselves as Islamic feminists; however, they are feminists and are incompatible with Islam. On the other hand, there are a group of male religious individuals, who are rigid and far from reality. They do not understand women's issues and therefore they have no solution. When I became a female activist, I wanted to find a solution from a religious perspective.

She went on to say:

The conservative problem is that we do not have any model based on our religious beliefs and family. There are theories and models based on gender equality in the world; however, we do not have any yet. Therefore, we only rely on trial and error.

The above quotations seem to illustrate the commitment that the ten conservative women participants have as female activists, to consider women's issues in a religious context. These participants, of both new and older generations, are seeking a new strategy, which is different to male conservative men and feminists, to solve women's needs. In addition, Pari, who was one of the women who had an important role in the Islamic revolution and called for a new strategy to reach a 'better lifestyle', argued that the country needs to have a cultural revolution. Similarly, as discussed earlier, there were some religious reformist women and secular feminists who also had a similar role during the Islamic revolution but were dissatisfied with the situation of women after Islamic revolution.

The respondents' accounts in this study suggest that religion is hugely influential in the way that conservative women defend women's rights. All conservatives held the view that Islam is the best resource to codify women's rights, rather than human rights. They assumed Islam has its own human rights in which rights were perfectly formed, while human rights written by humans may have limitations. For example, Saba, a self-defined conservative participant, argued:

The secular human rights foundation is humanist, while human's rights according to Islam is based on God. We went to Thousand Islands in Ottawa. In this area each union's representatives have their own island. These deputies write laws. While Islam focuses on poor people. There is a huge difference between the rights which are written by people and God. All the women's rights in the Quran are written in order to break the patriarchy's structure. For instance, in the prophet's time, if a man died, his wife was inherited by others. Therefore, God wrote rights of inheritance and broke the patriarchy's rules... According to human rights in the Quran, the more you control your ego, the closer you will be to God.

Saba's account suggests that religion is a perfect source of women's rights rather than human rights. In addition, most conservatives viewed human rights as particular to the West and not universal, and therefore they do not apply in Iran. For instance, Azam,

who saw herself as is a conservative woman, justified the conservative preference for laws defined in accordance with Islam. She argued that rights in a framework of Islam are more in favour of women in Iran compared with human rights:

There are certainly some similarities between those rights that we define ourselves in an Islamic framework and human rights. However, we think that Islam defines rights in a deeper and better way. Human rights are shallower and based on liberalism and individualism. It is defined according to utilitarianism and the capitalist system. Human rights are embedded in Islam. Islam considers all humans as equal, irrespective of their colour, race and gender...so we can begin to interact with the West and say that we believe one step above to what you assume for women's rights.

The above quotation suggests how conservative participants oppose human rights because of their perceived link with the West and liberalism. As discussed earlier, they critiqued Western feminists for the same reasons.

The voice and characteristics of conservative women activists have been ignored by the literature on women activists in Iran. Only a very few studies have merely mentioned the existence of conservative women activists in Iran (e.g. Afary, 1997; Mojab, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006); however, they failed to examine the characteristics of these women, including their views about a fair society and human rights. Human rights thus seem to be a key factor for all secular, reformist and conservative women in proposing a more egalitarian society. While secular participants called for a secular society based on human rights, conservative women were opposed to it as they associated human rights with the West and liberalism. Religious reformist women had varied responses to the extent they committed to human rights based on their own religious values. Moreover, as indigenous activists, they needed to prove their loyalty to the state and so this position influenced the way that they called for human rights.

Conclusion

Iran has complex gender politics which influences the way women defend women's rights and define a fair society. The stigma created by conservative leaders around the

terms ‘feminist’, ‘feminism’ and ‘West’ limited the activities and needs of secular, religious reformists and religious conservative women who attempt to improve women’s rights. Despite the importance of the term feminism within this limited context for gender politics, previous studies on Iranian feminists have not dealt with the reactions of women activists in Iran using these terms (e.g. Povey, 2001; Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Tohidi, 2016). However, data analysis in this chapter highlighted how this stigma and politics of gender has led women to take different positions that have an influence on their solidarity. For example, while there is a tension amongst conservative women in defending women’s rights, their position as women who oppose the West, secularism, feminists and human rights limits their scope for advocating women’s rights and means that they could not align themselves with secular and Islamic feminists.

Iranian gender politics use the terms ‘West’ and ‘feminist’ to stigmatise women who attempt to improve women’s rights. This puts pressure on women to prove they are ‘insiders,’ who also advocate women’s rights (Moghadam, 2002; Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2015; Tohidi, 2016). As discussed, the religious reformist women are the only pragmatist group who worked on different strategies to balance being indigenous and improving women’s rights. These women, contrary to conservative women, share the same aim (human rights), to varying degrees, with secular women. In the next chapter, I explore which rights all three categories of women identified as key goals.

CHAPTER FIVE: Differing Priorities for Women's Rights in Iran

Introduction

As already discussed, in contemporary Iran, reformist religious leaders are more open to the consideration of women's rights, but conservative leaders oppose the formulation of a more egalitarian reading of Islamic laws, in a very rigid way. Hofmann (2004) argues there is resistance amongst conservative clerics to reformist goals. They see reforms as an attempt to establish political liberalisation within the framework of an Islamic constitution. Such conservative clerics are dominant in *The Guardian Council* and the *Special Court for Clerics*. Contrary to conservative leaders who focus more on the aspect of 'duty' and 'obligation', reformist leaders highlight the importance of civilian 'rights' in Islam. Therefore, reformist individuals challenge the strong conservative concentration on the notions of 'duty' as constructed in Islamic jurisprudence. This is a conflict which is considered a threat to Islam by conservatives, and prompts them to control reformist efforts through their institutions (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). For example, bills related to gender issues, such as joining the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), directed at advocating women's rights were passed by the Sixth parliament; however, *The Guardian Council* rejected all of them on the grounds they were un-Islamic (Mohammadi, 2013). As Mohammadi (2013: 14) declared, '*The Guardian Council* claimed that these drafts are against the decrees of the leader. These progressive drafts could eliminate lots of discrimination against women. [but] they were rejected as they were not in accordance with authoritarian understandings of religion.'

Within this difficult context for gender politics, as discussed in Chapter Four, women take a variety of positions regarding the term feminist and achieving a more egalitarian society. Having laid out the participants' positions, this chapter explores the way that participants prioritise women's rights in Iran. While some studies detail Islamic and secular feminists in Iran (Ahmadi, 2006; Mir-Hosseini, 2006), there is almost no research focusing on how feminists and women activists, including secular,

reformist and conservative women, prioritise women's rights in Iran. This chapter describes the respondents' views on how and why they give priorities to certain women's rights and then discusses how they justify their priorities. Moreover, there is hardly any research that focuses on the concern of Iranian feminists and women activists on cultural inequality. Only a very few studies, for example Mojab (2001), claim that Iranian feminists and women's rights activists struggle for formal equality and do not focus on informal inequalities existing in culture. However, this chapter explores participants' views on cultural inequality, alongside legal discrimination.

The chapter is divided into three major sections. Section one examines how and why the secular and religious reformist participants believe in gender equality and gender justice. The second section explores how and why secular and religious reformist women give priority to certain rights such as court testimony, polygamy, employment and the age of marriage for women. The third section examines how and why most conservative women prioritise rights in accordance with the Quran and disagree with gender equality. In all sections, I will discuss a range of topics that different categories of women engaged with. I will talk about, for each category of women, the issues that they saw as the most important issues for them.

Gender equality and gender justice

Most of the participants, including secular and some religious reformist women who mostly viewed themselves as Islamic feminists, called for gender equality and argued that there are gender differences between men and women. However, the majority believed that these 'differences' are due to socialisation and cultural expectation, and only a few argued that gender differences are due to biological differences between men and women.

Most of these participants, asserted that gender differences are socially produced and therefore not a justification for differences in access to rights. These women believed in equality between men and women. For example, Gita, who identified herself as a secular feminist, believed that gender difference is not innate but defined and acquired within society. She argued that men and women should have equal rights:

Gender equality means that female physiological differences should not be the cause of social and legal deprivation. It means you should not be deprived of social, political, and legal rights due to your sex. Rather, you should enjoy equal rights...gender differences are definitely acquired. If you seek evidence, it is clear that being a woman is different in various communities. Sixty years ago girls had to talk less, and not laugh loudly. We regularly observe that the criterion for being a good woman or girl is changing; it has not been stable. When something is not stable it obviously is not innate.

Similarly, Monica, a self-identified secular feminist, made the same point:

Equality means that laws are enforced in the same way for all people...I think gender differences are not a matter of nature but culture. My nephew has grown up in a family that did not have the *Hijab*. He learned at nursery that women should wear the *Hijab*. When he saw me in the cemetery with a scarf on my head he was surprised and said 'Is my Auntie a woman?!'

The above quotations illustrate how most of these participants believed that gender differences are not dictated by sexed body and therefore men and women need to access equal rights and opportunities. The advocacy of equal rights by these women was also supported by some other participants, including women who viewed themselves as feminist, both secular and Muslim; however, for this smaller group it was on the basis of the argument that there is biological difference between men and women. For example, Neda, a self-defined feminist whose argument for equal rights is based on Islam, argued that although there are some biological differences between men and women, they should enjoy equal rights:

Gender equality means men and women are considered fully equal legally, socially and culturally. I accept the biological differences of a man and woman, but I think these differences should not cause discrimination.

All the religious reformist participants who advocated gender equality talked about how gender equality can be supported in Islam. For, example, Neda, saw compatibility between Islam and gender equality:

If we change our reading of the Quran, Islam is not in contrast with gender equality. For example, Soroush³⁵ introduces sharia' Ghabz va Bast³⁶ theory. He believes the interpretation of the Quran and our understanding of religious ordinances should be based on the time we live in. He says that we can change religion based on current issues. In *Shi'a*, it is said that according to time and place you can have different interpretations. I think it is a good way for people who are in favour of religion, as in this way they can keep and save the religion and advocate equality between men and women.

Neda's idea of interpreting the Quran according to the current time and place appears to suggest that a different understanding of religion helps religious reformist women to reach an agreement with secular women concerning legal and cultural equality between men and women. While most secular and some religious reformist participants, who mostly viewed themselves as feminists, advocate gender equality, some of the religious reformist women who defined themselves as religious women rights activists believed in 'gender justice'. These participants believed that men and women are different and they did not advocate equality. Instead, they use the term 'justice'. These interviewees were mainly women who had political experience and avoided labelling themselves as feminists despite their beliefs (Chapter Four). Analysis of the data shows that while these women used the term 'gender justice', they did not discuss any particular kind of gender justice. This suggests that the term justice is applied by these women to distinguish themselves from secular/Islamic feminists. Their use of different language allows them, first, to highlight their beliefs in religious values and/or particular roles associated with women, such as being a mother, and, second, to show their differences regarding feminist priorities.

All of the women seeking 'gender justice' valued particular roles associated with women, for example the role of a mother in the family. The use of the term justice for these participants is more associated with their emphasis on valuing the roles and responsibilities of women as mothers. For example, Setareh, who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, illustrated this. She was a senior in government, and

³⁵ Abdolkarim Soroush is a professor of philosophy and a reformist; he has been profoundly influential in Iran's religious intellectual movement.

³⁶ See Abdolkarim Soroush, *Ghabz va Bast e theoric e Sahri'at* (Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge) 1994, Serat Publications, Tehran.

gave an example of how mothers play more important roles for children compared to fathers:

Justice means individuals should be served in accordance with their nature and differences. You'll see how some differences between men and women eventually created different characteristics. For example, we like our baby to sleep with us. Babies also feel more relaxed with their mothers. They do not have the same feeling with their fathers. Gender differences are innate. The world has accepted it. For example, women are given maternity leave as they need it. Some countries have given paternity leave to men as well. Men are not given a break to rest; they are given it to help their wives to rest. It is an accepted thing and all societies recognise it.

The above quotation illustrates the views of some reformist religious women, who avoid being labelled as feminist, and highlights their perspective on the role of a woman as a mother, emphasising that for them there are essential differences between men and women. However, later I will discuss how, despite the roles that they associate with women as mothers, what they are advocating is gender equality. In addition, analysis of the data shows that there is another important reason why they use the term of justice rather than equality. This term enables the same religious reformist women who viewed themselves as religious women's rights activists to express their differences publicly with secular/Islamic feminists. As most women's rights activists had political experience, applying the gender justice term related to the stigma associated with feminist/feminism in the political realm.

As discussed earlier, the terms feminists and feminism are stigmatised within the political sphere, and participants with political experience attempted to distance themselves from them. Moreover, as these women need to prove their loyalty publicly to their own nation and religion, particularly to conservative political leaders, they preferred to use distinct language from feminists. Some of the religious reformist women with political experience echoed this idea, and talked about the reason that they use the term gender justice rather than gender equality. These participants argued that they applied this term to demonstrate that equal rights are in their view associated with feminists' demands, and are not their priority. For example, Nahal, a self-defined religious women's rights activist, who was a former Member of Parliament, said that choosing the term justice rather than equality enables women' activists to be more

accepted in both public and political spheres and consequently to be more active, especially in the political arena. She mentioned that even using this term was problematic in the seventh parliament during the conservative time:

Because I believe in equal rights for all human beings, equality is acceptable to me. However, our society misconceives the word 'equality'. We prefer to use the word 'justice' instead of 'equality'. Justice is more compatible with our people's beliefs. I think for people who intend to make social change it is very important to connect with the masses of people, their interests and their concerns. Justice is a concept that can be accepted more easily in our society. You might know that the seventh parliament even deleted the word 'justice'... there are some, both innate and acquired, differences between men and women. The word 'feminist' is interpreted as 'radical feminist' in Iran, and therefore being both a feminist and advocating for equality is resisted because of this notion.

A few non-Western scholars for example, Kadivar (2013), Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2013), Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2015) and Duderija (2017) mention that in Islamic discourse gender justice means that everything is in its proper place, and that men and women have their own essential places in the society and family. These authors note that this meaning of justice in traditional Islamic discourse is the root of discriminatory laws. However, analysis of the data illustrated that some religious reformist women used this term to refer to their religious beliefs and to some particular roles that they associate with women, such as being a mother, and importantly to their strategy to defend women's rights. In other words, the term justice, accepted by religious individuals, emphasizes their religious identity and also legitimizes their activities to improve women's status. Analysis of the data showed that there are no significant differences between the views of these religious reformist women, who advocated gender justice, and those women who saw themselves as feminists, and who advocated gender equality. This becomes clearer in the following section, when I explore how these women prioritised women's rights.

Secular and religious reformist women and prioritising women rights

All of the participants, including secular and some religious reformist women who called for equal rights between men and women, prioritised certain rights, such as testimony, polygamy, employment, and the age of marriage for women. These women

only insisted on equal rights and emphasised working on some rights at the same time. For example, all of the women who advocated equal rights, argued that the court testimony of a woman should be equivalent with a man and they demanded this equal right. They advocated this right because, in the Iranian legal framework, the testimony of a man is equivalent with two women's (as previously discussed in Chapter Two). For example, Sima, the only self-defined secular woman who believed in biological differences between men and women but advocated equality, pointed to the specific characteristics of women as being likely 'to be more pedantic and particular than men' and argued that the testimony of women and men should be equal:

In my opinion women should have the same rights as men. In the interest of testimony, women tend to be more pedantic and particular than men and this may increase the validity of their testimony. Therefore, if we do not want to say that women's testimony is stronger than men's, we can say it is just as valid.

Sara, a self-defined Islamic feminist, also sought the same rights in terms of testimony. She argued that this law is old-fashioned and should be re-interpreted in a different way to appeal to today's generation. She demanded that this law be reformed to reflect the current time:

This is one discriminatory law which exists in our penal codes that should be reinterpreted. Reformist leaders should take this law into consideration. My interpretation is that women had less activity in society at the time of the emergence of Islam, so they were partly unaware of events and affairs. For this reason, their testimony could not be regarded as a criterion, but women work alongside men at this time and even have complete knowledge of their contemporary events due to their various roles. Therefore, it is not fair that their testimony is invalid, while in some cases a man's testimony must be added to the woman's testimony to make it valid, even in cases which are especially related to women!

Simin, who viewed herself as Islamic feminist, expressed a similar view:

This is an issue that must be brought to the attention of the *Fuqaha*. According to the Quran, in the subject of midwifery, women's testimony is considered to be valid, whereas in economic matters it is not valid. The reason for this may be that, in the past, women did not involve themselves in economic issues but had been more concerned with child birth. This shows that women did not interfere in matters in which they had no experience. In today's generation, women now have more participation in financial,

economic, social, law and university affairs. Since women are more educated and aware, *Fuqaha* must modernise their interpretation of the Quran.

The above accounts highlight how religious reformist women shared similar ideas with secular women that the gendered binary between public and private sectors are less visible in today's society compared to the Quran's time and, therefore, this law on testimony is no longer applicable. For these women, the gendering of public and private spheres in the past led to this law; however, this separation no longer exists. This is one example of how Islamic feminists attempt to call for human rights, using the ability to re-interpret the Quran as a justification.

Similarly, the majority of participants, including all secular and some religious reformist women who called for equal rights, were against polygamy. According to the Iranian constitution, a man is able to have four wives at the same time, but the same does not apply to women. While this law is unpopular in practice and not socially considered an important issue, the women argued that this law should be changed so that a man can only marry one woman. For example, Haleh, a self-identified secular feminist, illustrated this by discussing that, although not all women experience polygamy, some are suffering from this issue and women activists need to advocate for these women's needs:

There is not a lot of polygamy in Iran; some female activists may argue that there is only a very small percentage of women who are in this situation, so why should it be our main priority? I, as a middle class woman, am not affected by this issue; however, a woman in Sistan Baloochestan³⁷, who lives within a different culture, is suffering more so. Therefore, the law should protect her but this is not the case; women are used whilst they are young and beautiful and when a woman no longer has these traits, she is replaced.

Haleh's quotation shows the extent of class and geographical variation between women's lives in terms of the degree to which they are affected by polygamy. In a similar way, religious reformist women talked about their struggle with this law and

³⁷ Sistan Baloochestan is an Iranian province located in the southeast of Iran, bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan.

their effort to remove it. Neda, a self-defined feminist, explained how women activists have attempted to convince the parliament that this law should be reformed:

We always disagreed with this law. We went to parliament with different groups of [Muslim] feminists. We objected there and had a debate with some members of parliament to convince them that this law causes many problems in society. When we were speaking with members of parliament, this issue was discussed in parliament. On that day, Larijani³⁸ announced that the bill should not be approved for a while.

Although Neda's account suggests that religious reformist women were not successful in changing the law, it illustrates how some women questioned the injustice of the current interpretation of the Quran and its application to civil codes and had the opportunity to renegotiate with political leaders over gendered codes. Religious reformist women believed that they could act as insiders whose strategy of pragmatism could work better than secular feminists within the Iranian context. This idea is echoed by some Iranian feminists' work, such as Mir-Hosseini (2006) and Ahmadi (2006), which emphasises the importance of the activities of indigenous and local feminists.

Another right that the majority of participants supported in this study, including women who advocated gender equality, is the equal right for men and women to be employed. As Rezai-Rashti and Moghadam (2011: 422) explain, 'According to the 1385³⁹/2006 Iranian census (Islamic Republic of Iran 1997), only 3.5 million Iranian women were members of the salaried labour force, compared with 23.5 million men.' Participants raised particular issues related to employment, such as the importance of women's paid work in the democratic process, the lack of policies to help women find employment, and the link between being financially independent and a reduced risk of domestic violence.

All of the women in this study whose priority was equal rights including gender justice between men and women emphasised the significance of paid work for

³⁸ Ali Larijani is a chairman in parliament.

³⁹ This is the Iranian calendar year, which is equivalent to 2006.

women. For these participants, the presence of women in the public sphere rather than traditionally staying at home is influential to democracy. For example, for Lida, who identified herself as an Islamic feminist, the attendance of women in the public sphere had a strong association with the democratic process:

I think that women activists can help the democratic process if they attempt seriously to promote awareness of women's issues and improvement of their situation, and also by encouraging women to work and be more active in society.

Lida's account highlights the importance of employment for women to the extent that she sees that it leads to greater democratisation in Iran. In today's Iran, although women benefit from the education system, they face difficulties such as child care and unpaid work in the home, to their ability work outside. Some of the participants who defined themselves as secular and Islamic feminists viewed access to child care and responsibilities for domestic labour as obstacles for women to being employed. For instance, Haleh, a self-identified secular feminist, spoke about how the structure of employment in Iranian society is patriarchal. She also reflected how a woman's ability to seek opportunities in society are greatly limited by motherhood being seen as a woman's prime identity. From her point of view 'there is a labour division of the genders', which includes considering women responsible for children and domestic labour. She went on to say:

Women depend on men economically, as less than ten percent of the country's wealth belongs to women, which shows that women have a lower status compared to men... There is a labour division of the genders in our society. For example, one of the challenges women face in employment is having children, as the period in which they give birth is often the same period in which they can be most active in society. State schools close at twelve pm; what kind of job finishes at this time? There is no such thing. Most of the nurseries are private and extremely expensive so the majority of women cannot access them. It is vital that good nurseries are available to mothers at a reasonable price, but this does not exist. The society should be more structured to be women friendly. There are implicit discriminations in society which prevent women from becoming employed.

In Haleh's view, the patriarchal structure of Iranian society encourages women to remain in the private sphere of the home rather than enter the public sphere of work. This suggests that the will of women is not enough, and rather they need support from

the state to allow them to be more economically active in society. The importance of employment for some interviewees was not just economic. For example, some who defined themselves as feminists talked about how being a paid employee empowers women in the private realm. These women associated being financially independent with a reduced risk of suffering from domestic violence. For instance, Monica, who identified herself as a secular feminist, commented:

A man at first says you do not have to work, therefore do not work. As a woman is not strong enough to believe working is her right, she thinks working is a misery and accepts her husband's wish. Then the man takes another step and says that you should not speak with your sister's husband and you should wear a scarf on your head ... after a while you see it is a violent cycle that gets worse. But it all started from somewhere that you became hesitant not to get a job and consequently lost your right to have one. Women should be trained at home or at school to defend themselves and be able to live independently.

A similar view was expressed by Sara, a self-defined Islamic feminist:

For example, if a woman is educated and she is a doctor, after marriage her husband tells her not to work. Many women usually accept this...they are dependent financially on their husband. Later, as they do not have a job, although they do not have good living conditions with their husband, they have to stay home and tolerate their husband's violent behaviour.

Similarly, Alice, who viewed herself as a secular feminist and worked in a part of Iran where many women commit suicide because of the pressures within their homes, explained how women activists in these areas try to empower women by teaching them sewing, to allow them to stand against violence at home:

In the rural areas, we teach women how to sew and gradually convince them that they don't have to do housework, farming, or stable work while also being physically abused. We tell them that now they no longer have to put up with this situation as they can sew, and therefore they can work for themselves. If they are in danger of committing suicide by burning themselves then they need to leave.

All the women who called for equal rights also talked about another law through which women are violated. As shown in Chapter Two, the age of marriage was raised from nine to thirteen for girls in 2003 (Tremayne, 2006). All of the participants who

advocated equal rights argued that the age of marriage should be at least eighteen. They reflected that although marriages under eighteen generally do not happen in Tehran, this does occur elsewhere in Iran. These participants insisted that this law, which is associated with problematic cultural practices, should be changed:

I have researched the issue of marriage below the age of eighteen. It was distressing to see a thirteen-year-old girl marrying a fifteen-year-old boy. Some parts of Iran are much more advanced, where the girls are educated. However, other parts are very much behind and, therefore, it is very important that female activists fight for the rights of women outside of Tehran who do not have a voice. (Lida, a self-identified Islamic feminist)

A thirteen-year-old girl is still a child and still plays with her dolls. Although in our society this practice is not common, it does take place in some areas because Iran is a multi-cultural country. For this reason, it is essential to change this law to beyond eighteen years old in order to develop the society and its needs, as our law is behind compared to the dominant culture. (Haleh, who saw herself as a secular feminist)

Analysis of the participants' accounts showed that most women who viewed themselves as secular or Islamic feminists have similar views on equal rights for women and men in law, but with different approaches. Some of the religious reformist women who identified themselves as Islamic feminists defended women's rights from within religious discourse. This strategy enables them to negotiate women's rights with religious leaders, but in a more limited way compared with other religious reformist women who distanced themselves from the feminist label.

Gender justice, women's rights and religious reformist women

Other religious reformists who thought of themselves as religious women's rights activists talked about gender justice and, similar to secular and Islamic feminists, advocated and prioritised women's rights, as discussed above. For example, some of the religious reformists, who viewed themselves as religious women's rights activists, despite their emphasis on particular gendered roles associated with women, such as being mothers, advocated for the employment of women. For example, Akram argued that the role of women in the family, particularly as a mother, is important; however, these roles should not mean that women do not have the right to employment:

There are some differences between men and women but these differences should not cause discrimination. Instead, based on their abilities they should enjoy rights based on special programmes, which means gender justice. For example, women's roles and responsibilities within the family are very significant for conservative women. They are not flexible about these roles to the extent that they do not advocate women's rights and freedom. For us, the roles of women particularly as a mother are important, but we do not view these roles in contrast with women's roles in public.

In comparison to secular or Islamic feminists who advocate equality, religious reformist women believed that laws relating to issues such as polygamy and the age of marriage for women should only be changed in a limited way. For example, in terms of polygamy, some argued that this law should be limited to exceptional circumstances. For these religious reformist women who did not call themselves feminists, gender equality might not work in some remote areas in Iran due to the complexity of their situation. These participants believed that this law is being practised by some families in rural areas, and they argued that there are some exceptions in society and therefore this law cannot be removed. Similar to secular and some religious reformist participants who identified themselves as feminists and called for equality, these self-identified religious women's rights activists view polygamy as a cultural practice, but unlike the former they believed that as a cultural practice this law should be protected and limited rather than removed. Importantly, they expressed their disagreement with the policy of conservative leaders who attempted to promote polygamy. For example, Akram, who disagreed with polygamy, stated:

Polygamy is not the need of our society. However, we cannot forbid this law completely as there are some exceptions. I do not agree with polygamy but I believe that it should not be so easy for a man to have more than one wife. However, the conservative party has tried to make it a more acceptable concept as they believe it is juridical and prevents immorality. I do not agree with the view of the conservative party.

She went on to explain that the Quran limits the number of wives that a man can have and ordered that a man must treat each of his wives equally, and he should be just with all his wives:

In our constitution, in terms of polygamy there are some restrictions for men; a first wife must give her permission before her husband can marry another

woman. In the Quran's time, as men had no restrictions, the Quran limited the number of wives they could have to a maximum of four. However, the conditions are that he must be just with all four women, which is impossible so a man must only have one wife. 'Just' in the Quran is not meant only as economically just; rather, it is also meant emotionally.

This quotation illustrates the view of some religious reformist women, as self-defined religious women's rights activists, who advocated gender justice and the defence of some rights in a more limited way. They took religious culture into consideration and preferred to limit this law rather than forbid it. Similarly, a few of these women who called for gender justice in terms of the age of marriage for women believed that the age of marriage for girls should not necessarily be eighteen. As discussed earlier, the age of marriage in the legal code is thirteen and these women argued that this law should not be changed but be restricted. They justified their view based on the argument that outside of Tehran, in rural areas, there are some families who believe that this law is religiously legitimised.⁴⁰ In addition, as these religious families cannot accept sexual relationships outside marriage, they support this law because it reduces the risk that a teenage daughter may have sex outside of marriage and consequently suffer social condemnation. A few of these religious reformist women mentioned that they preferred to limit these marriages by arguing that only girls who reach mental and physical maturity before eighteen years should be able to marry. The extract below exemplifies this:

As a head teacher, I have learned that in some ethnic groups in rural areas, when a girl reaches the age of thirteen or fourteen, they have sexual needs. We insisted that girls under the age of eighteen who are to be wed must be assessed by a midwife and psychologist to determine whether they have reached mental and sexual maturity. (Setareh, a self-defined religious women's right activist)

In summary, some religious reformist women, who did not label themselves feminist despite their beliefs, took the religious context into consideration and gave priority to equal rights in a more limited way. They applied the term 'gender justice' due to the particularity of the Iranian context. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter Four, they advocated rights in the framework of religion rather than human rights. They justified

⁴⁰ In the Quran, the age of marriage for girls is nine years old.

their preference by arguing that there are some important religious beliefs and values, and for these women these rights can be protected by Islamic rather than human rights.

The approach of some religious reformist women when talking about gender justice was that a few rights, such as polygamy and the age of marriage for women, should be more restricted. As these women take into considerations factors such as religious values and the political atmosphere in advocating women's rights, their position in turn gave them an opportunity to lobby political leaders. These women have the potential to be more productive in contributing to increasing the number of women in the government compared with other participants. Analysis of the women's accounts showed that these women attempted to improve women's representation in government by negotiating with political figures. These meetings and negotiations are significant as the participants who viewed themselves as secular feminists were rarely able to link political leaders to women's issues. In addition, other religious reformist women who called themselves Islamic feminists had limited opportunities to meet political leaders in person, such as the prime minister, and thus to raise the topic of women's needs. Moreover, conservative participants were less likely to discuss the participation of women in the political realm, as this right is incompatible with the gender roles they associated with women. This suggests that some religious reformist women who had political experience played an important role in raising women's issues with political leaders, particularly increasing the number of women in the government. Most of these religious women's rights activists explained how they sought to increase the number of women in the political sphere. For example, Elnaz, who saw herself as a religious women's rights activist, emphasised in the interview that participation in politics is an important right for women:

Women activists should negotiate women's issues with political leaders... For example, after Rouhani became prime minister we met some of his ministers and asked them to appoint a percentage of women in governmental jobs, such as a woman's ambassador... We, a group of women activists, went to speak to the ministers of the country to ask them to include women in politics; it doesn't matter whether they are conservative or reformist, it only matters that a specific percentage of politics is dedicated to women.

Highlighting the number of women in politics was also echoed by Maria, a self-defined religious women's right activist. According to her, women should be allowed to take part in different parts of society, but particularly in the political sphere. She said:

We have worked on the empowerment of women in the political sector and we have attempted to increase women's participation in politics. There was no limitation for my work and I was criticised by many who questioned my logic. However, I told these people that women must be empowered in all sectors of society.

Most of the self-identified religious women's rights activists, who had been engaged with politics, viewed the political participation of women as the way to achieve equal rights. They suggested that women's involvements in politics enabled them to be critical and achieve women's legal rights. For example, Simin, a former MP argued:

Women must have access to political arenas; they should be involved in parliament. Therefore, we could defend women's rights, such as the right of divorce and protection from domestic violence. However, if I am fighting for divorce, how can I help if I'm not a member of parliament? Being in parliament would enable me to advocate women's rights.

For most participants, the political participation of women would contribute to women's rights, but some religious reformist women who had political experience described how women politicians were faced with some limitations due to the Islamic framework. For example, according to the law, there are restrictions on women travelling abroad, as women require their husband's consent to leave the country. Nahal, a former MP, referred to this regulation and explained how the political involvement of women is influenced by these laws:

There are some limitations for women in Iran who want to become ambassadors; one of the government's concerns is that, upon leaving the country, a woman must ask her husband for permission. Therefore, the government is reluctant to undermine the man's authority.

The above quotation appears to suggest a clash of cultural and political/legal citizenship for women politicians. As discussed in Chapter Four, some religious reformist women who had political experience distanced themselves from the label of

feminism as, they argued, this label is stigmatised, particularly in the political realm. While these women experienced cultural limitations within politics, it seems that having political experience and distancing themselves from the language of feminism enabled them, firstly, to partly be accepted in the Islamic political realm and, secondly, to help negotiate women's rights with male reformists leaders, such as the right of women to be in the political realm.

Secular feminists and religious reformist women: calling for cultural change

Most of the secular women and religious reformist women, whether they called for gender justice or gender equality, shared the idea that legal change is insufficient to improve women's rights in a complex society like Iran. Instead, they argued that cultural change is also necessary to reach gender equality and gender justice. For example, Sima, who viewed herself as a secular feminist, argued that equality means addressing equality in law, culture and language. For her, equality in culture is even more important than legal equality:

For me, equality is now very important and, most importantly, a culture of gender equality. In many cases maybe our legislation has changed, but the culture of patriarchy fostered by our men and women, consciously or unconsciously, still applies. Changing the culture in such matters is much more important than changing the laws. What is the point of a law which is not practised by people? ...equality means there is no difference in law, culture, and language between men and women. It means there is no difference between men and women.

All participants except conservative women talked about cultural issues related to the existence of the unequal legal code related to divorce. Article 133 states that a man can divorce his wife whenever he wishes, but only a woman with a specific situation is eligible to have a divorce. For example, there are some particular circumstances that Iranian courts consider for granting a divorce to women: the castration of the husband, madness, contracted infectious disease, prison sentences longer than five years, and polygamy without the first wife's consent. Notably, there are also some terms and conditions in the marriage certificate within the Iranian constitution. According to these terms, if women and men agreed to sign them at the time of marriage, women can attain rights such as divorce and custody of the children.

However, the majority of participants emphasise that these terms and conditions cannot help. In their view, in the patriarchal society of Iran, achieving these rights is very difficult for women. For example, Azin, a self-defined Islamic feminist, said that it is not accepted in Iranian culture that women gain this right and there is a need for cultural change:

But these terms and conditions have their own problems; firstly, all women do not know about these conditions. Secondly, it is not nice in our culture to argue about signing the conditions before marriage as some men do not agree to sign. However, we need to increase awareness. By doing so, our culture would be improved. When a mother knows her daughter has the right of divorce, she accepts the condition for her sister in law too.

Similarly, Akram, who saw herself as a religious women's rights activist, argued that as women nowadays are more rational than at the time of Mohammad (Muslim prophet), this law should be re-read in the Quran:

Now, women have the right of divorce in their terms of marriage contracts. However, it is not enough. With the reasoning of women being more emotional than men, they have been deprived of this right in order to prevent the separation of the family. However, we believe that women nowadays are more aware and therefore more rational than women of previous eras, which is why they should have the right of divorce.

While these women disagreed with this discriminatory law most, except for the conservative participants, raised some problematic issues related to the right of divorce for women. The majority of secular and religious reformist women highlighted the balance between limited legal equality and cultural norms. They talked about the living problems that divorced women are faced with. For example, Monica, a self-identified secular feminist, illustrated how a divorced women experiences painful life events, both in society and with her family. She believed that not only should women have the right of divorce, but also that the state should have a policy to transform cultural issues:

Society ignores a divorced woman and she cannot form a relationship with others or find another husband. Therefore, if a woman gets divorced and only sits at home, this is not good. Sometimes, when you hear that a judge does not agree with a divorce, you think I understand why. When a twenty-year-old woman gets a divorce, she would sit at home and be oppressed by her brothers. Therefore, I agree with women having the right of divorce if they

have other rights as well and if society does not have a negative reaction. The government needs to have different policies simultaneously.

Similarly, Azin, a psychologist who defined herself as a Islamic feminist, mentioned that women are discouraged from getting a divorce in Iranian society:

It can be related to the personal fear of being lonely. She probably worries that, after her divorce, no man will marry her.

The above quotations illustrate how, in most of the participants' views, achieving the right of divorce for women is not enough to achieve gender equality, as cultural norms influence the post-divorce life of a divorced woman, thus discouraging women from getting divorced. In other words, as these women argued, it is not enough only to give women the right of divorce; they must also consider the public acceptance of divorced women. This is in contrast with a few researchers, for example Mojab (2001), who have been concerned with the issue of cultural inequality, and claim that Iranian feminists and women activists struggle for formal equality and do not focus on the informal inequalities existing in culture. The issues around divorce suggest limits to legal/political change that are more likely related to the risks created by everyday social reality. The complex situation of women who suffer in marriage shows how the decision making for a woman who needs a divorce is difficult. As explained earlier in this chapter, the majority of Iranian women depend financially on their husband. Understanding the complexities of what is involved in seeking to change women's rights and familial contexts highlights how women activists need to improve women's situations legally, culturally and financially at the same time.

Secular and religious reformist women: assigning priorities in the Iranian context

Most of the women, regardless of their arguments about gender equality and gender justice, shared similar ideas in terms of a law that was not prioritised by them. Despite their agreement on the right that women should choose to wear the *Hijab*, they did not put this right as a priority. The *Hijab*, including both the head-covering and modest Islamic styles of dress, is compulsory in public settings in Iran. The majority of the participants, except for the conservative women, believed that this law should be

changed and Iranian women should have the right to choose what they wear.

Importantly, even most of the religious reformist women said that they were against coercing women to wear the *Hijab*. However, obtaining this right was not considered a priority. These women thought that everyone should choose to wear the *Hijab* or not and the state should neither ban it, since religious women prefer to wear it, nor impose it. For example, Simin, who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, stated:

This law is not in the priority list for us... I believe in the *Hijab* personally but compulsory *Hijab* has not shown any results. If we take statistics, we will see that, compared to 25 years ago, the amount of those who understood the real meaning of the *Hijab* has now decreased. This is because the compulsory *Hijab* was introduced. I am just as much against the fact that the *Hijab* should not be compulsory as I am against a girl in France being denied education or employment due to her *Hijab*.

Akram, a self-identified religious women's rights activist, made the same point:

I personally agree with wearing the *Hijab* and I believe that it is in the best interest of society. If a woman wears the *Hijab* she is viewed as a person and not a woman. However, I disagree with compulsory *Hijab* because I think it should come from a person's own desires, not by force... the right to choose to wear the *Hijab* or not is not our priority. This is a very sensitive issue in Iran. The cleric who made a speech about the *Hijab* not being compulsory was very brave and managed to express his idea clearly.

While Simin and Akram are religious women who personally believed in wearing the *Hijab*, they argued that it should not be compulsory and women should have the right to choose. Most of the secular and religious reformist participants raised different reasons for defending the right of women to not be forced to wear *Hijab*. These reasons aligned with the participants' identities. The first reason was the association between wearing the *Hijab* and gender construction. A few participants, who were feminist and rejected the assumption that there is an essential difference between men and women, argued that the *Hijab* attributes a specific characteristic to women and is a symbol which differentiates men from women:

Women's repression began from 1978-1979. At the first women's day, women were beaten and forced to wear a scarf. Its consequence was a compulsory veil. Such pressures, plus the revocation of family laws, required a reaction. We wanted to form a resistance nucleus about these issues ...after the revolution the clergy came up and made women put on the *Chador* and

Hijab, and it was seen everywhere. In this way, a gap was created between girls and boys. (Anahita, a self-defined secular feminist)

The second reason, according to some religious reformist women, related to the particular meaning of the *Hijab*. They believed that making the *Hijab* compulsory removes the personal religious meaning of the *Hijab* for the wearer. These religious reformist women argued that forcing Iranian women to wear the *Hijab* has a negative impact on the concept of the *Hijab*. For example, Nahal, who identified herself as a religious women's rights activist, asserted that the result of the compulsory *Hijab* became a source of mockery in Iran:

The compulsory *Hijab* has not been successful and has not been able to make women more covered. Rather, it has become more something to be ridiculed and it has lost its real meaning. This is the current situation which exists in our country.

While the right to choose to wear the *Hijab* was significant for most of the participants, including the secular and religious reformist women, they failed to prioritise this as a rights issue. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, some interviewees who viewed themselves as secular and Islamic feminists argued that Iran is a religious country and some women in Iran are sensitive about the *Hijab*. Therefore, these feminists avoided prioritising the choice to wear the *Hijab* in order to prevent conflict with the views of religious women. These feminists argued that they need to be linked with the majority population of women in Iran. For example, Parastoo, a self-identified secular feminist, talked about women in Iran who preferred to wear the *Hijab*. She believed the connection between women activists and Iranian women could not be severed due to being against this law:

There are some women in Iran who prefer to live in a society in which women wear the *Hijab*. Several months ago I needed to go to the south of Tehran where the majority of women are religious. As we had NGOs in this area, I wore the *Chador* in order to work with these women. The point I am trying to say is that as women activists want to have a strong connection with women's needs in Iran, they do not prioritise this law, otherwise they lose their position among women with different beliefs.

Some women also argued that this is an area that conservative women are highly sensitive about. Sima, as a self-identified secular feminist, illustrated that conservative women defend the compulsory wearing of the *Hijab*:

Wearing the *Hijab* is considered a boundary for religious women. Some religious women who are close to secular women are not sensitive about wearing the *Hijab*. However, for religious women who are conservatives, the *Hijab* is very important. Therefore, it is not our priority.

The above quotation appears to suggest that the issue of wearing the *Hijab* is a point of disagreement between conservative and reformist and secular activist women. Sima's account suggests that it is important for women's rights activists to work on areas that are more inclusive of all women. Secondly, another factor that women raised to explain why the *Hijab* is not their priority was linked to the political sensitivity around it. Most participants echo the dominant view that the *Hijab* is an important issue for the political system or Islamic Republic of Iran. For example, Parvaneh, who saw herself as a conservative woman and agreed with compulsory *Hijab*, explained how much wearing the *Hijab* is important for the Iranian Islamic government:

At the beginning of the revolution, the state could decide whether the *Hijab* should be compulsory or not. However, this is now a political issue rather than a religious issue. Removing the compulsory *Hijab* now would be disadvantageous to the government.

This account suggests that the Islamic state is firm on the issue of women wearing the *Hijab*. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Two, conservative leaders are against some feminist activities such as calling for the right to choose whether or not to wear the *Hijab*, as they are considered un-Islamic and threatening to the legitimacy of the Islamic republic. These issues related to the *Hijab* seem to influence most of the women to not prioritise this, despite its importance for them. Contrary to most secular and religious reformist women, most conservative participants advocated the obligatory *Hijab*. These conservative women believed that the Quran advised women to cover their body.

It is important to mention here, as there is a very hard gender politics around gay issues, that participants preferred to avoid talking about this right, arguing that they would put themselves in danger. In the previous chapter, I explained that while secular women advocated human rights, despite their personal beliefs, they did not call for gay rights as they were concerned about the perceived risks involved with this right. This suggests how their prioritisation in terms of gay rights was influenced by

the political system and the sense of fear impacted on the way they expressed themselves.

Having discussed the ways secular and religious reformist women prioritised women's rights, for conservatives, the Quran is understood in a traditional way, and is the source of women's rights. In the next section, I will explore how these women gave priority to women's rights.

Prioritising women's rights according to the Quran from the conservatives' view

The majority of conservative women disagreed with the notions of gender equality and gender justice, as proposed by the women who were secularists and religious reformists. These women prioritised women's rights in accordance with the Quran and in most cases without any re-interpretation. In this section, I will only discuss the conservative women's view of some particular rights, such as testimony, divorce and employment, as these do not necessarily defer to the teaching of the Quran, but are interestingly debated by conservative women. As discussed in Chapter Four, conservative women argued that they became women activists to defend 'their rights'. They believed that feminist demands are not their demands. In fact, they called for saving the existing laws that secular and reformist women were attempting to change. For example, Yasi, who viewed herself as a conservative woman, thought that gender differences are innate, and because of their differences women and men cannot have equality, as they complement each other:

I believe in women's rights as discussed in the Quran... I do not believe in either justice or equality. They are both the same. My opinion is similar to Parsons⁴¹ I believe this because family is very important to me. I think if everyone plays their own role, then the family system works well and society gets the benefit of it. So I do not believe in gender equality... I believe gender differences are innate. When you are a woman your body works

⁴¹ This participant believed in Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), an American sociologist. Parsons argued that the family operated most efficiently with clear-cut sexual divisions of labour and, in turn, with a complementary set of roles that link men and women. According to Parsons' view, men should support the family financially by working outside, while women should take the role of raising children and managing the household. Therefore, he believed that complementary roles would ensure the stability of the family and, therefore, the functionality of society.

different from men, for example breast feeding and pregnancy. So, how can they be equal?

As their argument is based on Islam, conservative women believed in different rights for men and women. For example, Parvaneh, a self-defined conservative participant, claims that men and women have different rights and obligation due to their essential differences:

We have both biological and psychological differences. All the psychological differences cannot be socially constructed. From a religious perspective a part of the psychological differences are genetic differences. Therefore, this creates differences in the roles and responsibilities. Secular and reformist women activists do not believe this idea. They think these psychological differences are constructed in society. So, these women activists do not believe in differences in rights, obligations and roles. They seek equality while we believe men and women have different rights and obligations due to their genetic differences. For example, if God makes a man a guardian of a woman because of his genetic differences, he will have some rights according to his position.

Hani, another participant who self-defined as a conservative based on her understanding of religion, argued that Islam is a system in which both men and women have different roles and rights and, therefore, this forms a balance:

I am a women's rights activist and I believe that Islam has the solutions to all women's issues. If we accept Islam as a system and a package we would not consider one part of the package as a separate part of the whole package. For instance, a women's inheritance in Sharia law is half of a man's. This is one element of the system which is meaningful in the system. Out of it does not make sense. In this system, a woman would not lose her high position as a human being and would not be condemned as a woman. My criticism of feminism is that they perceive women are lower than men and they attempt to reach equality between them. This is not good enough to start with. In Islam, women are not in a lower or higher state than men. They are different. And their differences do not lead them to be unequal. Men and women complement each other. Such that if a woman does not play her own role there would not be a balance in the system. In my opinion, equality between men and women is not justice. Men have the responsibility to be of service to women in order that women may then be able to play their own roles.

The above account illustrates the conservative women's views of women's rights built on their beliefs and interpretation of Islam. There are, in their view, some fixed rights

and obligations in the Quran through which men and women play their roles. As discussed in Chapter Four, in contrast to reformist participants, they do not believe the Quran should be re-read according to the time and place they are living in, which explains how their understanding of religion impacts on their views in terms of women's rights, gender differences, and equality. This led them to avoid defending all the rights supported by secularist and religious reformist women, as discussed earlier. For example, in terms of the Iranian civil code that values the testimony of two women as being equivalent with one man, these women address the Quran and God as the source of this law and therefore in their view it cannot be changed.

The majority of conservative women disagreed with prioritising and defending the equal rights between men and women in terms of testimony. Instead, they agreed with the existing law as it is based on the Quran. They argued that there are some biological justifications for this law, such as 'women are more emotional than men' and 'women's menstrual cycle'. These biological 'differences' in their view influence women and their testimony. For example, Anoosh, who identified herself as a conservative, appeared to believe that this law is rigid and this was justified because of 'the emotional nature of women':

I agree with this law. There are some *Ahkam* that come from the verses in Quran. These are called the first *Ahkam* and therefore we cannot change them. This law comes from this type of *Ahkam* and this is why I do not argue with this law. *Fuqaha* believe that the reason of this law is due to the emotional nature of women, which prevents them from giving a rational testimony in court.

Similarly, Azam, a self-defined conservative and a researcher on Muslim women and Islam, said:

I have done some research in this matter with a team of doctors; we found that during a woman's menstrual cycle, some may experience a particular syndrome that causes them to behave out of character. Therefore, if women are affected by their hormones during this period, this could affect the validity of the testimony they provide.

The above quotation suggests that these women insist on the particularity of religion in a traditional way. This approach is very different to that of the religious reformist women. They argued that this law arose many years ago, when women did not participate in the public sphere. This suggests that while both the conservative and religious reformist women valued religion, they had different approaches to which laws should be open to change. The majority of conservative women maintained that laws articulated by the Quran should not be changed. While upholding the Quran, there was some tension over what they recognised as an inequality embedded in it. For example, as an educated woman who was not happy with this law, Parvaneh, a self-identified conservative, commented:

The issue here is not whether I agree or disagree with this law. As a woman I may not be happy with the current situation of testimony. However, when something is rooted in *Fiqh*, it must not be challenged. As an educated individual this law may offend me, but I have to accept it because it has come from God. We may attribute some reasoning to this law but it is unknown if this is the same reason that God has. We are usually not able to identify the real reason for *Ahkam*.

Yasi, who viewed herself as a conservative woman, held similar views and was seeking an answer:

I have a problem with this law. I have had this experience many times where, after a certain amount of time, I have understood the reasoning of *Ahkam*. Therefore, I have decided not to make rash decisions. At present I am unhappy with this law, but I do not have any solution. Why are women overlooked? There must be an answer.

This illustrates how some conservatives did feel uncomfortable with the law on testimony, but believed that it cannot be changed. These feelings suggest that these participants are in a complex situation. While they are reluctant to accept some laws, their understanding of religion discourages them from challenging Islam's commandments and affects their priorities, despite their feelings.

The uncomfortable feeling of conservative women is also seen around the right of divorce being only for men; however, they call for some changes. While all of the religious conservative women did not advocate that women should have the same right to divorce their husbands, these women argued that the difficult divorce process

for women should be more feasible. As mentioned already, according to *Shariah* law, if a woman can prove to the court that she is in critical circumstances, she can be granted the divorce. Therefore, all of the conservative women believed that divorce should be limited to circumstances in which women ‘have great difficulty’. However, these participants disagreed with the broader rights of divorce for women as they believed that increasing the divorce rate may cause some problems for society and families:

Divorce is increasing in our society. This is damaging as there are now two extremes in situations of divorce; in one situation, a woman will have great difficulty in justifying why she deserves to get divorced. I am advocating women in these situations. In another circumstance, a husband and wife are able to come to an agreement without any issues arising. Therefore, we cannot say that divorce is difficult; rather, it has become much easier for some individuals, and thus it is damaging the solidarity of their family and society. I think it would be bad if divorce became the norm in society.
(Zahra, a self-defined conservative woman)

According to the conservative women, particular readings of the Quran on concepts such as family, the responsibilities of women in home, and the role of men as protectors, are highly valued. The values they associated with these concepts led them to avoid advocating certain rights, such as employment for women. Instead, they argued that women should execute traditional female roles rather than working outside the home.

Amongst the conservative participants, the family, a woman’s heterosexual partner, and her children, were highly valued in shaping women’s identities. Many of the religious conservative women spoke about the importance of the family to the extent that they expected women to stay at home and prioritise looking after the family over paid work. For example, Parvaneh, who viewed herself as a conservative woman, prioritised the responsibilities of women in the private rather than public sphere. She valued marriage more than employment:

My priority is the importance of a female’s roles in the home rather than roles outside the home. Experience shows that previously, our policies encouraged the employment and education of women. Women who attended university have lost opportunities of marriage.

Analysis of the respondents' views about motherhood shows that a number of religious women highlight the importance of the roles of a mother in the family, to the extent that women need to stay at home because of their responsibilities as a mother. They argued that during the first three to four years it is crucial for children to spend time with their mother. For example, Saba, a self-defined conservative woman argued:

The role of men and women are very different in socio-economic and family situations. A mother who has given birth to the child has different duties compared to the father, at least for the first three years. If these different responsibilities did not exist, it would harm both the mother and the child. It should not be my responsibility to go out and work to provide for the family.

The majority of conservative women constructed women as having a particular responsibilities based on their essential characteristics, as defined within the Quran, in the private sphere. Because of this, some sought support from the state in order to enable women to stay at home and nurture their children. For example, Saba argued that women should be supported financially by the government according to their roles such as housekeeping and babysitting:

A woman marries and does the housework for forty years without an income. The law should be modified. As the woman of the house raises the children, does housework, makes handicrafts⁴² and provides a dowry,⁴³ the government should provide the woman with some money.⁴⁴

These views show how, for most conservative women, more emphasis was placed on women's responsibilities within the family and as a mother. This led them to seek a particular solution, welfare provision, to Iranian women who only worked in their own household. This means that the conception of citizenship for these conservative women is more likely grounded in valuing women's activities in the private sphere rather than in paid employment, primarily in the mothering role. Also, calling for the support of the government demands that the state recognise that women's activities in

⁴² In some rural areas, women make handicrafts such as rugs to sell or keep at home.

⁴³ In the Iranian culture, women are responsible for bringing a dowry after marriage.

⁴⁴ There are no benefits given to Iranian housewives.

the private sphere are a part of civil society that the government should be responsible for supporting financially.

As the concept of family is highly valued by conservative women, they support the view that women belong in the private sphere. They argued that, in this way, the family is more likely to be protected as women will have limited interaction with other men. For example, Yasi, who defined herself as a conservative, argued that women who work outside the home become familiar with different men. In her view, these situations are more likely to lead to divorce:

Do the reformist women predict the impact on society after women become employed? In reality, the man will no longer support his wife and also women will be exposed to other men, so the rate of divorce will increase.

This suggests upholding particular values of conservative influence on some women's rights, such as employment. In addition, Yasi believed that employed women challenge the role of men as a protector at home. This was mentioned by the majority of conservative women who raised two main reasons that men are viewed as the protector of the family. Firstly, conservative women believed that men are decision makers at home and all had a special attachment to their status as a wife, who is 'passive' in decision making. In terms of the importance of considering men as a decision maker, Parvaneh, a self-identified conservative, argued that it is a characteristic of a well-arranged family:

I wish to follow my mother's lead in making my father the decision maker, as I liked this structure and felt that we had a well arranged family.

Similarly, Zahra, who identified herself as a conservative, said:

I have done research about decision making among couples and the points in which women have their say. For example, women mainly interfere when choosing family friends. However, in terms of selling their house, despite men consulting with their wives, they have the final say. Most women are content with this arrangement, as they believe that the man is the source of income and therefore is more aware of what the family can afford. Therefore, within the family, women have the right of consultation but the final decision is made by men.

This assumption, which considers men as a key decision maker and protector, supports the law that limits married women to be employed only with the permission of their husband.⁴⁵ While this law is challenged by secular and reformist women, conservative participants support it.

The second reason for men being perceived as the protector is the idea of considering men as the breadwinner, which is held by the majority of conservative female participants. The following quote from Anoosh, a self-defined conservative, illustrates this dominant point:

From a religious perspective, employment issues for women are not important. The religious government should manage women activists' demands. In this [Islamic] framework, women working is not seen as a main issue... In an Islamic country, the work force should mainly consist of men.

For conservative women, staying home was seen as the best option, but for women who choose to work, finding a job in line with conservative women's views of morality and which contributes to gender differences is prioritised. Despite male conservative politicians not advocating the participation of women in the public sphere (Chapter two), some conservative women supported particular jobs for women, who preferred to work outside the home, such as nurses, primary school teachers, and gynaecologists. Their preferences came from the gender differences they perceived between men and women and also the issue of morality. Women's modesty and the social mixing of men and women are considered key issues within the public sphere that Islamic politics seeks to control. Some conservative women associated moral issues as well as gender differences in the choice of professions with choosing professions for women. For example, Azam, a self-defined conservative woman, prioritised some jobs for women which, in her view, benefit women in the Islamic context and are related to morality. For her, social mixing between men and women and 'morality' are considered essential issues, e.g. having female doctors or gynaecologists is important for pregnant women. Also, she values being a teacher for

⁴⁵ According to Article 1117 of the Iranian Civil Code, a man can ban his wife from working if he thinks that her job is incompatible with his or his wife's dignity or the interests of the family. .

a woman as it is linked to employing mothering skills. This valuation results from considering women as child bearers:

If we did not have female teachers, then who would nurture our school children? Morality is important in Islam. With female doctors, a pregnant woman will feel more at peace. Women should have a role in specific jobs such as gynaecologists, to benefit Iranian women. However, some jobs, such as clearing rubbish, it is the duty of a man and not a woman. This is due both to a female's physical structure and her responsibilities such as bearing a child, cooking, and nurturing her child. It is therefore more ideal for a woman to stay at home and do the housework rather than to go out and clear rubbish. The Islamic religion does not accept a man staying at home while the female goes to work to earn money.

In Azam's view, living in a religious context means women need to choose jobs that have functions for other Muslim women. Her idea that 'With female doctors, a pregnant woman will feel more at peace' and having women gynaecologists suggests that some religious women prefer to go to female doctors, and thus these gaps should be filled efficiently for the needs of women. In addition, she believed that women should choose particular jobs because of essential differences between men and women. For example, she assumed that particular jobs such as teaching are more appropriate for women due to their nature. Importantly, analysis of the data illustrates that the idea that women should choose particular jobs was supported only by religious conservative women activists. Göle (1997) had a similar discussion; although, her research on Muslim people generally was in the context of Turkey. She suggested that in the Islamic context in Turkey women are presented differently, as they are in the complex situations of both a patriarchal structure and morality, which is considered an essential issue in the Islamic public sphere, and constrains women to be employed equally. In the western context, however, studies (e.g. Fraser, 1995) suggest that only the patriarchal structure plays a significant role in limiting women's labour activities. For example, in Fraser's argument (1995), considering men as breadwinners impacts on the way in which women appear in Western society. She argues that women are presented differently, for instance, primarily as working mothers and working wives. They are only secondarily seen as workers, part time workers, and members of the helping professions employing mothering skills, such as nurses, primary school teachers, childcare workers, and social workers. While this feminist in the western context views the concept of the man as a breadwinner to be a

problematic influence on the segregation of the labour force, this study suggests that in the Iranian context moral issues are valued by the majority of conservative women, and also play an important role.

While most of the conservative women disagreed with the ways that secular and religious reformist women prioritise women's rights, their disagreements are not always complete and tensions remained around certain issues. For example, analysis of their accounts on legal testimony and the right of divorce being only for men illustrates some were uncomfortable with these laws. In addition, despite male conservatives, these women are more flexible about the inclusion of women in public arenas. In addition, they would attempt to give women more room in the private sphere, for example regarding divorce and receiving welfare for housekeeping and babysitting.

Conclusion

Secular feminists and some religious reformist participants who labelled themselves feminists, including Islamic feminists, held similar views on gender equality. While some religious reformist women called for gender justice to express themselves differently from feminists, they shared the same priorities for women's rights; however, in some cases, this was in a more limited way. Applying the term gender justice instead of gender equality is more likely to be due to the emphasis the women placed on their religious identity, alongside a strategy for these women to advocate women's rights in the difficult gender politics of Iran. Some studies such as for example, Kadivar (2013), Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2013), Mir-Hosseini *et al.* (2015) and Duderija (2017) suggest gender justice in Islamic debate has its particular meaning, which relates to the essential places of men and women in society. As this term is accepted in Islamic debate, some religious reformist women used this term to legitimize their activists. However, as discussed, they act in a way to improve gender equality. Despite the focus of studies on the limitations of women activists in Iran (Ahmadi, 2006; Afshar, 2016; Tohidi, 2016), most have not considered how feminists and women activists tackle the existing constraints and priorities of women rights in detail. However, this study shows that while secular and religious reformist women

advocate gender equality by different strategies, they avoid giving priority to a few controversial rights, such as choosing to wear the *Hijab* and gay rights. Additionally, as shown in Chapter Two, while most scholars focus on the importance of legal inequality, very few have been concerned with cultural inequality. Mojab (2001) is one example of such a study, who claims that Iranian feminists and women activists struggle for formal equality and do not focus on the informal inequalities existing in culture. In contrast, the women's accounts in this study illustrates that both legal and cultural inequality are the focus of both secular and religious reformist participants. Moreover, calls by secular and reformist religious women for cultural and legal equality at the same time suggest the complex context in which these women work. Secular and reformist religious women take their complex context into consideration when assigning priorities. This suggests that, in spite of the assertion of conservative participants that these women are linked to western feminists and echoed their goals, secular and religious reformist women take their context and contemporary gender politics into account for their activities. This illustrates how their characteristics are home-grown and are distinct from other feminists around the world (Tohidi, 2016). While conservative women disagreed with the ways that secular and religious reformists advocated women's rights, they shared some disagreements with male conservatives' views. Based on the ways that participants advocate women's rights, the next chapter will explore the ways in which they conceptualised democracy.

CHAPTER SIX: Concepts of Democracy and its Possibilities

Introduction

This chapter explores the women's views of models of democracy and their possibilities in the context of Iran. Although Iran is now an electoral democracy in terms of political process, it may not be considered a fully democratic country. The views of women activists about democracy are crucial because, as Sen (2009: xiii, cited in Richardson and Monro, 2012) states, 'democracy has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist but by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the population can actually be heard'. This illustrates the importance of the ways in which the participants define democracy and their views on which kinds of factors act as barriers or enablers to move toward democratisation. While research has been carried out on democracy in Iran (e.g. Jahanshahrad, 2012; Moghadam and Haghghatjoo, 2016; Moghissi, 2016), no single study exists which explores concepts of democracy for Iranian feminists and women activists, and the possibilities they advocate for democratisation.

This chapter examines the extent to which there are differences regarding models of democracy, and the centrality of Islam and gender for interviewees. It explores whether democracy in the participants' view is Islamic or secular. In addition, it examines the women's views about the factors which may prevent or aid democracy in the context of Iran. The first section examines how Iranian feminists and women activists understand democracy and what this means to them. The second section explores the factors that feminists and women activists believe act as barriers to democracy. The final section describes the perspectives of the participants on what could enable democracy.

The centrality of Islam and models of democracy

Analysis of the interviews suggests that the participants viewed two models of democracy: a model of democracy which is defined within the framework of Islam, and another based on secularism. Most participants talked about a secular model of democracy, and these women disagreed with limiting democracy by using the word 'Islamic'. However, all the conservative women advocated a particular type of democracy based on religion, and they accept these concepts only to the extent that they do not undermine Islamic principles such as wearing the *Hijab*.

Religious conservative women, Islam and democracy

As discussed in Chapter Four, all of the conservative women argued that Western feminist issues are different from Iranian women's issues, and that the term feminism cannot be applied in an Iranian context. Democracy for these women, in the same vein, is associated with Western liberal values that are inapplicable in Iran. These participants talked about the incompatibility of Western democracy and the specific religion of Islam which needs to be practised in Iranian society. For these women, religion influences the model of democracy they were proposing. The data analysis illustrates that the key binary for these women was 'West' and 'Islam', and that they were not in full agreement with 'Western democracy' in the context of Iran. Instead, they advocate particular types of democracy in which religious values are protected. This group of participants argued that democracy should be Islamic in three different ways of describing the same model of democracy: Islamic democracy, *Mardom-salari-ye dini*, and the model of democracy that currently exists within Islam. All conservative women believed that, in a democratic system, firstly, a *Supreme Leader* plays an important role and, secondly, laws and Islamic orders should not exclude or contradict each other.

The majority of conservative participants believed in Islamic democracy. This form of democracy for these women is seen as different from Western democracy, within which Islam should be the fundamental basis of the legal system and also people's

decisions are considered only if they are within the Islamic framework. The following quotation illustrates this position/approach to democracy:

I do not agree with the democracy applied in the West [...] Islamic democracy has been defined in the Iranian constitution whereby we have a *Supreme Leader*, with the highest position, then the president, the members of parliament and the *Khobregan Majlis* and All of these members are voted for by the public, this is Islamic democracy. If the people are against the *Shariah*, the Iranian constitution does not allow this. Anything that goes against the *Shariah* cannot be made legal. The role of *The Guardian Council* is to make sure that all of the laws are in accordance with the *Shariah*.
(Zahra, a self-identified conservative woman)

While the term Islamic democracy was used by most conservative women, a few of these women talked about *Mardom-salari-ye dini*. *Mardom-salari-ye dini* is a literal translation of Islamic democracy in Iran. It is worth mentioning here that when speaking Persian the English term ‘democracy’ (دموکراسی) is normally used. However, a few conservative participants used the word *Mardom-salari-ye dini* instead of Islamic democracy.⁴⁶ For example, Anoosh, who defined herself as conservative, stated:

I’m thinking about how much democracy and Islam are compatible. We have a debate called *Mardom-salari-ye dini*; however, this must be in accordance with Islam. This means that in some areas which involve governing, certain policies and activities may not be in accordance with democracy.

The use of the word *Mardom-salari-ye dini* by these conservative women suggests that they even avoided applying the English term democracy, and this illustrates their desire to distance themselves from the West. In espousing an Islamic model of democracy, the language they used illustrates how they take a position in terms of the ‘West’. In addition, a few conservative participants who talked about a model of democracy within the framework of Islam discussed how using the word ‘Islamic’ with ‘democracy’ means that Western democracy is practised alongside religion, which is problematic in their view. These women believed that there is a model of democracy in the Quran which is the ‘advanced’ and perfect type that in their view is

⁴⁶ The term democracy in Persian is translated as democracy and also mardom-salari. When it comes with the suffix ye-dini (religious or Islamic) it means religious or Islamic democracy. .

the best existing model of democracy. Therefore, they believe that the Iranian state should maintain the type of democracy in Islam. For example, for Pari, who viewed herself as a conservative, 'Islam is a type of advanced democracy in itself' and she questioned those who support 'Western democracy alongside religion' or Islamic democracy. She disagreed with a society within which 'management and thinking styles are based on Western democracy' but 'wearing the *Hijab*, behaviour and diet' are Islamic:

You can imply that Islamic democracy is the same as Western democracy with the notion of religious tone. It means using the word 'Islamic' before Western democracy is not correct... Democracy exists in Iran because Islam exists and Islam is a type of advanced democracy in itself. The fact that some presidents in the past did not commit to Islam does not reflect on Islam, but on the people who were in power. Otherwise, the democracy that exists in Islam is better than that of Western societies. I do not agree with having a Western democracy alongside religion. In such a system, it is possible that wearing the *Hijab*, behaviour and diet could be Islamic, but management and thinking styles are based on Western democracy, which is wrong from my point of view.

Azam, who also saw herself as a conservative, went on to detail Islamic thinking style and argued that Islam teaches Muslims better behaviour compared with democracy:

Islamic ideology teaches better social values compared to Western democracy. For example, telling a lie, talking or thinking badly about others, are perceived as bad behaviour, as it does create behavioural biases when interacting with others. Also, in the Quran, other people's rights are prioritised compared to your individual rights. This is a far better idea than the democratic idea of freedom in Western countries.

While most (if not all) of the conservative women advocated a particular model of democracy in which the binary of Islam and the 'West' is significant, this notion was critiqued by the majority of the participants, including reformist religious women and secular feminists, who believed that democracy cannot be translated into an Islamic version. These women proposed a model of democracy without any qualification. This is illustrated by the following quotation from Donya, a self-defined religious women's rights activist, who argued that democracy means democracy and it cannot be labelled as Islamic democracy:

Democracy has its own definition, and we cannot label it as ‘Islamic’ or ‘Western’. I do not agree with these labels as a democracy is a democracy; if people are given the right to speak for themselves there is no Western or Eastern way of this.

Similarly, Sima, a self-identified secular feminist, argued that the concept of democracy cannot be limited by combining it with religion. She believed that during Khatami’s time the term Islamic democracy was a strategy created to move society towards democratisation:

There is no such thing as an Islamic democracy, this term is a paradox [...] Democracy cannot be given a prefix just as human rights cannot. If it is a human right, it should apply to all whether they are Muslims or not. We cannot restrict democracy by adding a prefix to it.

The raising of the notion of a binary type of democracy, as suggested by the participants and their views over whether democracy should be secular or Islamic, in which the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ play important roles, needs to be understood in the context of the issues these women raised about democracy. All of the participants talked about certain issues that in their views are fundamental for a democratic society. All of the women, based on their beliefs, commented on key issues such as having the right of people to be political decision makers in the country, freedom of speech and behaviour, and gender issues. However, the women viewed the relevance of these issues differently.

Secular feminists, religious reformist and conservative women: democracy and related issues

The majority of secular feminists and religious reformist participants argued that for democracy to exist in practice people should have the right to choose the best option for a type of government, such as a secular or religious state. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Iranian state has both a president who is elected by votes and unelected institutions and bodies, such as a *Supreme Leader*, and *The Guardian Council*,⁴⁷

⁴⁷ The role of *supreme leader* and the *Guardian Council* are to ensure that the country is ruled in accordance to God’s will. *The Guardian Council*, who are selected by *The Supreme Leader*, supervise

which holds the most power and impacts the process of both the election of the parliament and voting in parliament. Later, it will be discussed how, in the view of secular feminists and religious reformist women, this political structure might have a negative impact on democratisation. Interestingly, for some of the religious reformist women who had political experience, this idea is rooted in the way that they understand Islam. These women reflected on how in Islam it is recommended that people should be the decision makers, and even those citizens who call for a secular state should have their demands accepted. For example, Akram, who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, viewed the aspects of democratic practice from her Islamic faith. As a religious reformist woman who had political experience, she understood the concept of democracy through the behaviour of *Imam Ali*.⁴⁸

Democracy is when people govern themselves; people decide their own fate and build their own future. This is what Islam is about. Islam says that people must decide for themselves. *Imam Ali* did not come to power till people asked him to rule the society. Within a democratic system people's will is significant. If people now do not wish to have *The Supreme Leader* in the state, he should not stay in power.

In the same way, Simin, who identified herself as a religious women's rights activist, and was an ex-MP reformist, argued:

Shariah is the basis of an Islamic Republic. The right interpretation of *Shariah* is not against people's will. Therefore, people's decision to have a non-Muslim representative in parliament is their right. It is their right not to have Islamic governance. We can see in Islam that when people decided not to have *Imam Ali* as their leader, he accepted it and it means that he himself honours people's rights.

The above quotations appear to suggest that different readings of Islam may have an impact on a person's understanding of democracy. This understanding of democracy is similar to other secular feminists and religious reformists, which means that for these women the people's will is significant in ruling the state to the extent that in

the legislation passed by parliament and disqualify the laws which are not compatible with *Shariah* or God's will. They are also charged with approving candidates (according to the extent that they were dedicated to Islamic values) for the presidential election of the parliament.

⁴⁸ Ali is considered among *Shi'a* Muslims to be the first *Imam* after the Islamic prophet.

their view it is acceptable even for people to wish not to have an Islamic state or *Supreme Leader*. However, this idea is problematic for the conservative participants.

When we look at what the conservative women argued, their approach to democracy was more cautious or limited based on their way of thinking about Islam and its relationship to the operation of government. Contrary to the religious reformist participants, conservative women believed that the Quran cannot be reinterpreted and that a fair society is one in which a society has a religious *Supreme Leader* in power. In their view, this type of society is governed by God's will. This notion influenced the conservative women's view for not considering the people as the only decision makers. While most of the women associated different aspects of democratic practice with the right to make political decisions, most of the conservative women argued that democracy can be problematic due to this feature. They argued that the people's will cannot be fully trusted. For example, Zahra, Parvaneh and Yasi, who all identified themselves as conservative women, talked about different aspects that explain why the issue of the people's will is controversial. Zahra discussed how governors who have money and power influence and manipulate people's ideas through advertising and adopt the process of democracy to pretend that they support individual benefits in society. She constructed Western democracy as a type of state that only supports particular individuals who have more financial and political power, in the name of the people's will. This suggests that in their view democracy, particularly in a capitalist society, can be used in favour of capitalists:

Democracy in today's form is a mechanism for the benefit and rights of people in power with money. This means they decide who comes to power in the name of democracy. If democracy is about people's benefit, this is good. According to the constitution in an Islamic Republic, people should choose the president and parliament representatives. All the people should be involved in the decision making process; however, not in the form of Western propaganda which influences people's opinions. It is important that people's opinion in a democracy should not be deceived in order for one specific group to benefit.

Parvaneh raised another aspect of people's will that she saw as problematic, and this relates to the compatibility of what people wish and Islamic principles:

My view is that the Quran has *Mardom-salari-ye dini* in it. People can choose but their choice is not sufficient to us. Actually their choice should not be against *Shariah*. For example, homosexuality is not in accordance with Islam, and therefore we cannot accept this.

Yasi disagreed with both Islamic democracy and *Mardom-salari-ye dini* and claimed that Islam has its own advanced democracy. She talked about the issue of the people's will and its limitations because of the capabilities of humans. She argued that currently in Iran representatives who are chosen by people are not experts or qualified and, therefore, she found it difficult to rely on their abilities to make decisions for her. In her view, God's authority has no restriction in the same way as humans, and is therefore more reliable:

Democracy exists when the law is not determined by religion. When you put your trust in a representative, at the end of the day he could say that this is all that he is capable of. However, when God's authority governs, this will not be an issue. We have a full package called Islam, where our obligations are clear. Concerning matters such as work, family and inheritance, you know what you need to do. Even if there is an issue that we do not have an answer to, we can refer to *Valie Faghih*.

The above accounts appear to suggest that conservative women are supportive of the limitations of people's will, and in this their view is very similar to their male counterparts in the conservative groups (see Chapter Two). In the current Iranian political structure, the question of whether God or the people should be considered as decision maker has resulted in conflicts between two main groups, namely reformists and conservatives (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). In the society desired by the conservatives, the people are ruled by 'true Islam' and led by *The Supreme Leader* and God's will. As this view is threatened and questioned by reformists and secularists, conservative leaders (mainly male politicians) have established some barriers to defend their 'ideal state'. These limitations aim to curb the scope of reformists and secular activities by suppressing them, in order to hold on to the theocratic side of the state. Therefore, from a male conservative politician's perspective and conservative women's views, constraining some democratic practices and limiting an individual's freedom and activities helps them to protect their desired Islamic society.

Contrary to the conservative participants, most of the women raised the issue of freedom of speech and behaviour and democracy. The reason that these women raised this issue is more likely rooted in their experiences as women's rights activists in a society influenced by restricted gendered politics. In Chapter Five, I explained how the enforced wearing of the *Hijab* is an important issue for Iranian women activists; however, they avoided prioritising this right as the women argued that this issue is a red line for the state and the conservative groups. In addition, I discussed in Chapter Four that the term feminism is controversial within Iranian society and women need to be cautious about which women's rights they demand and what language they use. Based on this context, the majority of participants talked about the issue of having freedom through which individuals can freely talk or behave. For example, for Gita, who identified herself as a secular feminist, a democratic system plays a central role in allowing individuals to have freedom of speech and behaviour. In her view, in Iran individuals need to pretend that they are religious to carry out their activities. Importantly, while she mentioned that in Iran democracy is partial and citizens do not have the freedom of speech, she also critiqued other parts of the world, including Western countries where individuals have similar issues:

I feel some feminists in Iran are even irreligious, but they express themselves under cover of religion, considering interpretation, and their interpretation may be based on human rights but attach to it an Islamic label to proceed to their goal... There is a partial democracy here, but the presence of this democracy is better than its lack. There is also democracy in other countries, but we can see that it is sometimes violated. For example, in the US police may kill someone and they treat people severely. In Europe, there are no political prisoners in reality but I have seen and I know the place of political prisoners is in asylum. It means you cannot oppose a system, you can express yourself but your idea should not threaten conservatives and capitalists of different lobbies. Therefore, democracy is relative.

Laleh, who viewed herself as a Muslim feminist, used to organise meetings with other women activists in her house in order to talk about women's issues. She preferred to be active and contribute to women's movements in her private space rather than in the public because of the Iranian political situation that discourages such activities:

Democracy is freedom of speech so I can easily speak with you to give you my opinion without having any problems with the system. I could wear what I like. There are no limits in my doing such as why I danced, or made a film, or the freedom of writing in any field. I really think democracy is very

interesting for all Iranians, as some freedom has been taken off us such as wearing clothes. We have to wear what we have been told.

The above quotation illustrates how freedom of speech and behaviour is important for Laleh. Her statement illustrates her resistance to the enforced wearing of the *Hijab*, suggesting the extent to which she closely associated women's status and democracy. In the following sub-section, the participants' views about the *Hijab* issue will be elaborated and the link between the ways that gender and sexuality are constructed within a democratic system will be discussed.

Democracy and issues of gender and sexuality

The ways in which issues of gender and sexuality are understood within the democratic system was a subject raised by the majority of participants. The women discussed different issues related to women and democracy such as democracy and the right to wear the *Hijab*, equal rights between men and women, welfare, sexuality and violence against women.

As discussed in Chapters Two and Five, wearing a *Hijab* in public spaces is compulsory for women and has become, perhaps, one of the most controversial issues in Iran. Wearing the *Hijab* in public became obligatory following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, but many Iranian women have been attempting to challenge these boundaries. Recently, they have questioned the wearing of the *Hijab* in cars, arguing that this space is a private space.⁴⁹ In other words, while wearing the *Hijab* is compulsory for Iranian women in public, including while driving, many women drive with their headscarves resting on their shoulders. Another example is that of White Wednesdays,⁵⁰ considered to be a movement to protest the compulsory *Hijab*. The leader of this movement is a feminist activist located outside Iran. As discussed in

⁴⁹ The news report about can be found on this website:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/11/compulsory-hijab-rule-increasingly-flouted-by-iranian-drivers>

⁵⁰ White Wednesday is a social media campaign which started in the summer of 2017. For more information, see the following website: <http://skepticroview.com/2018/02/01/white-wednesdays-movement-protesting-compulsory-hijab-iran-growing/>

Chapter Five, most of the participants in this study avoided giving priority to the right to choose to wear the *Hijab* due to the perceived level of risk for them. However, every Wednesday many Iranian women walk individually down different streets without wearing the *Hijab* for a few minutes, sometimes while holding a white scarf on a stick. Also, they share photos and videos through the leader of this movement on social networks such as Facebook, to show their opposition to the mandatory dress code. Despite different forms of resistance by women to this law, the state is firmly standing against changing the requirement. For example, some women face having their cars confiscated, court fines or even being detained.

While most participants associated democratic practice with the freedom to choose to wear the *Hijab*, for a few women, primarily the conservatives, women not wearing the *Hijab* was considered as an issue in a democratic system. For these women, there is recognition of the need to limit freedoms, even though they spoke about democracy. In these women's views, the association between democracy and being free is considered a problematic issue because of their faith. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, there are some obligations that religious participants, particularly conservatives, advocate for women, such as wearing a *Hijab*. These responsibilities and obligations are drawn from their understanding of religion and priorities. The majority of conservative participants believed that if women do not wear a *Hijab*, this could bring about immorality in society. These understandings and beliefs might partly explain why wearing a *Hijab* is a significant issue for them. For example, Anoosh, who self-identified as a conservative women's rights activist, talked about the potential tensions that exist between the responsibilities advocated by conservatives and Western democracy:

For example, it is possible that women will be obliged to wear a *Hijab*. This is not compatible with the Western democracy. Wearing the *Hijab* is important for us as it contributes to the chastity and modesty to society. From a religious point of view, Western democracy cannot be practised in our country. If we have Western democracy, people might not want to wear the *Hijab*, in contrast with the religious values and morality.

This quotation suggests that the religious foundation of conservative women plays an important role in defining a particular type of democracy that is more compatible with

their faith. It seems that Western democracy, in their view, is more likely to be a liberal democracy which focuses on individual rights and choices, and is unable to support their beliefs, such as the importance of wearing the *Hijab*.

As discussed in Chapter Five, the majority of women called for equal rights between men and women. Those who believed in the equality of men and women defined democracy as a system that defends equal rights between individuals. These women critiqued the current state for not providing them with equal rights:

Democracy is when no one has priority over another. Everyone is the same according to the government. This means *The Supreme Leader* has the same position as a woman in a remote area. This is an important basis of democracy. Women's movements attempt, at least, towards equality between men and women. However, these movements are linked with other democratic needs in the country. (Haleh, a self-defined secular feminist)

Similarly, Bitá argued that democracy is about equality between men and women and freedom from discrimination. As a Kurdish Sunni who saw herself as a Muslim feminist, and who had suffered from discrimination due to being a female and because of her ethnicity, she stated:

Until now democracy has been the best option for governing people as it gives people of different genders and ethnicities equal rights and freedom. Perhaps in the near future we could find a more suitable alternative that could meet the needs of people from different backgrounds more appropriately... the truth is that the current state does not view people as equals. I am a Sunni Muslim and I have experienced discrimination. Not just me but other professionals, some of whom are men, struggle to work in politics due to their faith. Therefore, my situation is much harder because I am also a woman.

Contrary to these women, who talked about the association between democracy and equality between men and women, a few women, mostly secular feminists, critiqued particular types of democracy, namely Western liberal democracy, for creating economic inequality between men and women. These women believed that capitalism resulted in class differences between men and women:

Because liberalism in capitalism, I mean neoliberalism, has worsened women's situation and created an extreme class difference between men and

women, and this is its achievement. It has destroyed the world from economic and health aspects and from every aspect which is related to money, facilities and wealth (Parastoo, a self-identified secular feminist).

Some women, including secular, religious reformists and conservatives, raised the issue of democracy and violence against women. These women shared their views about the different ways that violence against women is practised in Western democracy. For example, Alice, as a self-identified secular feminist, mentioned that women's bodies are exploited in Western countries that are supposed to be democratic societies:

In Europe, although democracy exists, there is homelessness, racism and prostitution. I do accept that there are lot of issues or rights that are valued and protected in Western countries; however, half naked woman standing next to a petrol station to get the attention of the drivers so they will fill their vehicles in that station. This is violence and abuse against women. When pornography, sex trafficking, is one of the major trades after arms sales and drug smuggling, is this a real democracy?

Azam, who identified herself as a conservative woman, made the same point:

I do not criticise the true meaning of democracy, I even accept it. In my opinion true democracy is not practised anywhere in the world. Why is pornography so prevalent and no one opposes it? Pornography is not beneficial to women. When in supermarkets dog food is advertised with a woman, what does it mean? I do not dispute that women are smart and beautiful. They have their own potential. I think that God has created them for nurturing human beings. However, women in Western countries they are seen as economic tools. Wherever you go you see women used for economic benefit. Is this really women's intellectual potential or do they only view and use the woman's body? I disagree with this notion and think that women are degraded.

The above accounts appear to suggest that some women believe that in Western capitalist countries women are violated. This illustrates that for some women from all backgrounds capitalist society can be seen as controversial as it influences the ways that democracy is practised in society. The issue of improving women's right to be protected from violence united all the women, regardless of whether they were conservative, reformist or secularist; however, they disagreed on the issue of gay rights as gender equality. Due to the fact that there is legal discrimination in Iran

which affects women from minority groups, such as lesbians, for a few of the women, mostly the secularists, minority rights was one essential factor in a democratic system. Anahita, who identified herself as a secular feminist, was concerned about minority and gay rights; she commented:

I believe in personal freedoms and also I accept socialism which focuses on personal freedoms as well...To the extent that it does not limit another individual's freedoms. I am a person who also cares about minority rights within a democratic community. I think minority rights must not be ignored within a democratic system. They ought to have the possibility to turn into a majority.

While for some secular feminists a democratic system should advocate gay rights, as discussed in Chapter Five, they did not take any action to improve this right due to the sensitivity of this issue in Iran around the issue. However, this right was considered problematic for the majority of religious women, both for the conservatives and some of the religious reformist participants who distanced themselves from the label feminist. For them, this subject was where they drew limitations around democracy in Iranian society. Analysis of their accounts showed the extent to which the boundaries related to sexuality issues are highlighted within a democratic system. For example, Simin, a religious reformist who saw herself as a religious women's rights activist, mentioned 'the people's will' as a significant element of a democratic society, and talked about limitations of the people's will in terms of gay rights. This contradiction in her ideas suggested the extent to which she regarded the centrality of hetero sexuality in relation to democracy:

I do not believe in absolute freedom, perceiving a human can do whatever they want without any boundaries. This absolute freedom is a basis for human rights. I do not believe that we can change the natural human creation ideals and provide a platform to do whatever they want. I mean people who are not sexually straight.

As discussed above, two models of democracy were proposed by the participants, namely Islamic and secular models. Moreover, the women in this study raised different issues about democracy. These issues are important as they related to the proposed models of democracy and map across the binary of Islamic and secular democracies in different ways. For example, the issues that arose for the majority of

conservative women, such as whether people should be the only decision makers and individuals should have freedom of speech and gay rights, illustrate how for conservative women Western democracy is seen as a liberal system that does not fit their Islamic beliefs. Similarly, Collins and Owen (2012) in their empirical study, distinguish between secular democracy and Islamic democracy and emphasise the role of religiosity as an influence on the choice of Islamic democracy over secular democracy. Moreover, considering Western democracy as a capitalist system, in conservative women's view, resulted in important issues such as violence against women. The concerns of the conservative women about different issues suggest how Western democracy and their religious values play a significant role for them in advocating Islamic models. These models of democracy enabled them to protect their particular religious values and define a model of democracy different to those in the West.

The views of some religious reformist participants who had political experience and who distanced themselves from the label feminist indicate that they called for individuals to have the right to be the only decision makers, have freedom of speech, and to choose whether not to wear the *Hijab*. Some issues that affect women, such as gay rights, there were mixed views on whether they would or should advocate for them. Their views on issues that affect women indicate that while they refute the label of feminism they are involved in activity focused on the rights of women.

As discussed in Chapter Four, religious reformist women called for the reinterpretation of the Quran to achieve a more egalitarian society. They supported a society governed by Islamic laws which have been reinterpreted based on human rights. Reinterpreting the Quran in accordance with human rights instead of accepting certain human rights on their own suggests that religious reformist women saw the need for Islamic values to be protected. The gendered boundaries in the majority of these women's views map onto the Islamic and secular model of democracy and it suggests that despite their suggestions for a secular model of democracy, issues related to gender and sexuality discussion prevent them from being in full practical agreement with secularism. Instead, they defined the boundaries of a secular model.

Analysis of data showed that secular feminists and some religious reformist women who called themselves Muslim feminists called for a secular model of democracy. Their support for the secular model does not mean that they were in favour of Western democracy. They raised some issues related to Western democracy, such as the capitalist system and its influence on creating class differences between men and women. Also, the Western political and economic conditions, in their view, violated and exploited women. This suggests that secular and Islamic feminist women preferred a secular model of democracy different from the Western model. In fact, they advocated a specific Iranian democracy that is secular and is neither Islamic nor Western. Having discussed the models of democracy and the issues related to democratic practices outlined by the women, I now turn my discussion to the factors that participants considered as barriers to democracy.

Barriers to democracy

The majority of participants did not believe Iran was fully democratic. In their view, three key aspects might prevent democratisation: political-religious leaders, freedom of information, and the economic situation. Most of the women argued that the roles of *The Supreme Leader* and Guardian Council act as a barrier to the democratic process. Moreover, a minority group across the sample talked about how the absence of freedom of information in Iran hindered democracy. These women were a significant number of those who were reformist politicians. In most of all participants' views the economic system was also considered an obstacle to democracy.

Political-religious leaders

As discussed in Chapter Two, Iran has a distinctive political structure which maintains the role of *The Supreme Leader* and *The Guardian Council* in terms of ruling the society. The role of *The Supreme Leader* is seen as the true power in Iran and no individual unit of the power structure can act without co-ordinating with him (Parsa, 2016). *The Supreme Leader* is called the 'Guide of the Revolution' and although he does not engage with the daily affairs of the government, his authority

allows him to dismiss the President and appoint the heads of the military, media, revolutionary guards and judiciary (Abootalebi, 2000). Similarly, with regards to the power of *The Supreme Leader*, Article 113 of the Iranian Constitution states that after *The Supreme Leader*, the President is the highest official in the country. The President is responsible for implementing the Constitution and acting as the head of the executive, except in matters directly concerned with *The Supreme Leader*. For most of the women, having *The Supreme Leader*, who has to be a cleric and is the highest ranking religious (which means he is more powerful than presidential figures in the West) and political authority in Iran, meant that Iran is not completely a democratic country. They talked about the role of *The Supreme Leader* in the Iranian political structure as incompatible with democracy. For example, Simin, who saw herself as a religious women's rights activist, expressed this view:

The most important thing in order to establish democracy is the structure of the government and the political system. Within the structure of the government, again the most important thing is the lack of concentration of power – which means that power should be divided into different constitutions... However, there is a *Supreme Leader* who has all power, and therefore moving toward democracy is a kind of dream as long as we have a *Supreme Leader*. That is why I think we are so far from a democracy. There is too much of a distance between the current structure and the democratic structure.

Farah, a self-defined Islamic feminist, made a similar point:

Although our country has some criteria for democracy, such as having voting rights to select some state positions, I can still say we do not have much of the criteria for democracy. Our democracy is incomplete in Iran. We have in place a *Supreme Leader* who is very involved in executive matters, but who is not elected by the people. It might be said that *The Supreme Leader* is chosen by the Assembly of Experts elections; however, the members of the Assembly of Experts are elected by *The Guardian Council*. *The Guardian Council* are appointed by *The Supreme Leader*. This is a vicious circle! Although it is true that we have a President and Parliament who are chosen by a public election, the non-democratic appointment of *The Guardian Council* and *The Supreme Leader* are obstacles that restrict true democracy.

Accounts such as these illustrate the view of majority of the women activists who regarded democracy in Iran as being incomplete due to the complicated political structure existing in this context. Similarly, other research has explored the ways in

which the political system limits the scope of the democratic process within political state structures. For example, Abootalebi (2000: 46) argued that ‘Iran has a complex, cleric-dominated but popularly driven political system. The institutional framework designed for the *Shi’a* Islamic Republic embraces both popular participation and a balance of power within the ruling elite circle’.

In a similar vein, Parsa (2016) asserts that the unelected *Supreme Leader* has unlimited power and that this negates the principles of democracy. He argues that the structure of the Constitution cannot be reformed without *The Supreme Leader* being in agreement. Accordingly, the power of *The Supreme Leader* has a great impact on the way in which society is governed. Moreover, as Parsa (2016) points out, *The Guardian Council*, which includes conservative religious lawyers appointed by *The Supreme Leader* and also supervises the laws elected by the parliament, ensures that all legislation conforms to Islamic law. Analysis of the interviews showed that the majority of participants believed that *The Guardian Council* could restrict decisions made in the parliament. For example, in the case of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was agreed by the parliament during Khatami’s time (discussed in Chapters Two and Five), the majority of participants believed that the Convention was rejected by *The Guardian Council* because it was incompatible with their conservative understandings of religion. This illustrates how sometimes political decisions by parliament can be ignored and undermined by the religious elite in Iran. For example, Monica, who identified herself as a feminist activist, stated:

As long as *The Guardian Council* have this structure, stories like these will continue to occur. ‘The Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ was included in other Conventions, and was already accepted by the government, so its rejection is nonsense.

She went on to explain why *The Guardian Council* rejected joining the convention:

...because it is the opposite of their interpretation of the Sharia, they rejected it. Our situation is very disappointing.

Maria, who saw herself as a religious women’s rights activist, made a similar point:

These disagreements are rooted in the patriarchal structures of *The Guardian Council*. From their viewpoint, if women cross the red lines which they have defined, Islam will be in danger... There are two views about Islam that eventually must be involved in these decisions.

As there is disagreement between reformist and conservative parties in terms of joining the Convention, Maria believed that this is a point on which ‘two views about Islam’ (reformist and conservative views) struggle. As discussed in Chapter Two, there are two different understandings of religion in the Iranian political system, reformist and conservative, and sometimes there are clashes between these two different viewpoints. The power of these two approaches/groups is sometimes unbalanced due to the support of *Supreme Leader* for conservatives. Therefore, even a parliament conducted by reformists is not considered the place where the final decision is made that will enable changes in Iranian law. This political system within which conservatives sometimes challenge the policies of the reformist groups can result in censorship of information. In the next section, I will discuss how the lack of freedom of information acts as a barrier to democracy.

Freedom of information

Some of the religious reformist women who had been involved in politics had experienced censorship of information during Ahmadi Nejad’s time. They called for the end of censorship and emphasised how suppressed freedom of information in the Islamic state was an obstacle to democracy. It is likely that the reason these women raised this issue is linked to their experiences as women politicians who identified as reformist MPs or ministers. Analysis of the interviews illustrated that it was not only the censorship of information related to women’s issues which caused suffering, such as violence against women, but also the fact that as reformist politicians they were suppressed. For example, Nahal, a reformist MP, talked about the important issue related to girls abused by their fathers. She describes how she was under pressure because she was told to be silent about this issue:

In people’s view, the family is a safe place but there are still cases of family sexual abuse. In the first or second year of working in parliament I came across different cases of sexual abuse; however, the problem was far too systematic and if or when talked about you were labelled as having

exaggerated the problem. For example, one woman, after discovering her husband was abusing her daughter, was convinced that she would not be protected if she took action. In 2002 when I was following and addressing these issues in parliament I was told to keep quiet and not talk about it.

This account suggests that reformist religious women who are politicians can be censored publicly to prevent them from questioning the political system of Iran, and it also shows the extent to which the prevalent male dominant view was to keep information about violence against women's rights suppressed. Moreover, another reason that influenced religious reformist women to emphasise the lack of information is related to the difficult situations that they have faced in the recent years. As discussed throughout this thesis, there have been disagreements between reformist and conservative views. As the reformist view supports democracy and questions the role of *The Supreme Leader* in moving toward democratisation, the reformist groups, including reformist women, have been under pressure particularly from the Green Movement (see Chapter Two).

Some of the religious reformists who were politicians talked about two main sources for accessing information, including activists and the media such as satellite TV and the internet. These women believed that people can access information through women activists and media that are not controlled by Iran. For example, Setareh, who identified herself as a religious women's rights activist, believed in the role of civil activists in promoting clear information:

In order to move toward democracy, people should receive clear information about what is happening in the political sphere. Civil activists should disclose the information which has been censored and promote the awareness of people. Political elites want to censor the information.

Maria, a self-defined religious women's rights activist, also talked about how information is censored within 'official broadcast channels' in Iran, but went on to state that people can receive information through media outside Iran. There are some Iranian channels and websites active outside Iran and people can access them via satellite or the internet. It should be mentioned that despite satellite TV being forbidden in Iran, some people use it in their home. Maria stated:

For example, our national media does not give out clear information, but some people can have open access to clear information through social networking, satellite and virtual spaces ... some people now receive their information and news in these ways, not from official broadcast channels regulated within the country.

In today's Iran, there is a lack of political structure that enables people to have a say in the operation of the state. This has resulted in the censoring of information in order to direct the society in the 'desired' way, as perceived by political leaders. For instance, Abbotalebi (2000) asserts that writers and editors who have spoken out and questioned state leadership have been punished.

While the majority of participants perceived that the Iranian political structure and its policies, including limiting freedom of information, have a negative impact on the process of democracy, most women also talked about another key factor, which is the influence of the economic barriers on transitioning to democracy. This is a significant point in understanding how they realise that religion is not the only issue at play when considering the democratic possibilities in Iran. In particular, the women raised different factors such as the role of the welfare system and the influence of the West on the process of democracy in Iran.

Economic barriers

Some respondents believed that the shortcomings of the welfare system in Iran and its effect on society have an impact on democratisation. For example, Alice, a self-defined secular feminist who worked in rural areas, believed that a strong state is needed for democracy in Iran and argued how the poor economic situation might affect women's education and early marriage:

I think that the democratic government must make education compulsory. In remote areas of Iran, due to the poverty they face, both culturally and economically, girls cannot be educated and are forced to marry at a young age. Therefore, this is the government's responsibility to give these people the opportunity and facilities to improve their living conditions.

Shabnam, who viewed herself as a Muslim feminist, echoed the importance of welfare and facilities in Iranian society. However, she went further and called for a strategy which is about the needs of NGOs that can lobby for people's requirements in society:

The democratic government must provide facilities to people to secure their welfare. It is the responsibility of the government because it has been elected by the people. Therefore, the government must respond to people's demands, and the first demand is welfare, peace and security. Welfare is not a thing that should be given to people, but it must be provided. We need NGOs to consult with and lobby the government and discuss people's needs and demands.

Gita, a self-defined secular feminist, also identified the issue of welfare in a democratic system; however, she associated democratisation in Iran with broader economic issues in the world. She critiqued the current global situation and argued that the impact of international capitalism on the state meant it had become 'less responsible toward their citizens':

The period of national welfare has passed. Governments are less responsible towards their citizens after Thatcherism. The world is mostly in the hands of multinational companies and international capitalism. The fact is that governments do not decide anymore but some multinational companies which have influence over different countries make decisions for you. However, a national welfare government was defined so that it fulfils the primary needs of individuals such as food, clothes, housing, employment, health, legal rights, and civil rights. The government must be the people's representative for these things and it must not have a place beyond law.

Gita questioned the capitalist system, particularly after Margaret Thatcher's period of office, suggesting that in her view the West has negatively affected the process of democracy across the world, including in Iran. As most of Iran's exports are oil and gas, it seems for her that international companies have influenced the country through these products.

The relationship of Iran and the West through oil has led to changes to the economic model of the country. These changes link to the dynamic that exists in Iran between what is good for Iran and how it is mediated. Oil brought wealth for some, but at a potential cost as Western countries and Western influence comes through oil. The role

of the external impact on the economic model of Iran was highlighted by some (19 women) of the women activists, including secular and religious reformist and conservative women. These women expressed their views about how economic changes related to oil have influenced the process of democracy. In other words, these women believed that oil has had a negative impact on democratisation. For example, in the words of Haleh, a self-defined secular feminist:

There is a special political and economic construction in Iran. The political elite has become the economic elite. This is an important barrier to democracy. The state depends on the oil rather than citizens' taxes. Therefore, oil enables the government to move independently from the people. The major problem that hinders democracy in Iran is the political elite who took power. Otherwise, surveys show that Iran's condition is one that is ready to go towards democracy. The level of educated people in Iran is high and this country has engaged with the concept of democracy since 1906. Iran has a good social background to move toward democratisation but the political elite, which has the economic power, resists constructing democracy...

She went on to say:

I do not want to say that as long as we have oil we cannot reach democracy. Oil can help the country... I mean that instead of resisting, the political elite should accept that democracy can improve Iran's future. If we do not move toward democracy, Iran's position would be dangerous and it could degenerate.

One of the women believed that the impact of oil resources, particularly in the case of Iran, has had a significant effect on the roles of NGOs. Saba, who identified herself as a conservative, argued that oil is the source of financial power of a small number of groups close to the operation of the state:

Our society is different from that of the West. In the West NGOs and civil organisations are shaped by the citizens' tax. However, our society is managed by the oil budget. It means that NGOs for people who are in the political structure act as instruments to reach their aims. Our NGOs are a power tool outside the body of the government. Our NGOs have political and executive arms...therefore people (political elites) who have money establish NGOs and the public body, comprised of ordinary people, can be their infantry.

Haleh also discussed the problems which oil may cause, such as empowering political leaders and making them independent of the people. However, in her view the negative role of oil could become positive in the hands of democratic leaders and elites. In addition, Saba illustrated the way in which powerful leaders with power and money due to their access to oil can establish particular NGOs (funded and established by political leaders empowered by oil), and extend their power outside of the political structure into the public sphere. She argued that NGOs should be characterised by concentration on grassroots involvement and they need to actively critique the ways that the state acts. She was the only voice who believed that these particular funded NGOs may not be places where people can forward their interests. Instead, she suggested that they support the political leader's interests. In Saba's view, the role of oil could impact the economic and political structure of the state by emphasising particular NGOs that do not threaten state sovereignty but support it. This suggests how oil revenues may potentially reformulate the position of some NGOs and become a tool for political leaders who receive their financial power from oil resources. In Saba's view, oil resources enable the political leaders to control the roles and performance of NGOs, thus turning them into organisations which support them. Therefore, she argued that these organisations that are considered a factor in the democratic process can in practice become barriers to a democratic system. It is worth noting that this is a minority opinion. The majority of participants who talked about NGOs saw them as independent. The concerns some women had over oil echo concerns amongst some scholars, who note the negative impact of oil on the democratic process. For example, Ross (2001) argued that any nation state's policy spent considerable sums of money to dampen the pressure for democracy. Also, by keeping the finances hidden, autocratic states empower their governments and remain undemocratic (Ross, 2011). It is important to understand that in these women's view the Iranian democratic process is shaped within the bigger international context. Having oil as a commodity in Iran is crucial but a mixed blessing. This illustrates how in a few women's views, the West has an influence through oil and therefore an economic and democratic impact.

The direct role of the West on the democratic process in some Arab countries was also raised by a few women. These women associated the Arab Spring with the

resources in Arab countries. The Arab Spring ,which began in 2010 in Arab countries in the Middle East, was a revolutionary wave of both violent and non-violent demonstrations, protests, coups and foreign interventions. A few participants, including secularists, religious reformists and conservative women, talked particularly about the interference of the West and the capitalist system on the democratic process in the Middle East. They argued that Western countries and the capitalist system are not only helpless in the process of democracy in the Middle East, but also led these countries to a chaotic situation. For example, Touran, who viewed herself as a conservative woman, talked about the Arab Spring in Arab countries and its consequences. In her view, the ways in which the West in the name of democracy interfered in diverse countries in reality resulted in making these countries more violent, and individual situations became even worse:

Humanity has experienced a lot of different ways but has not reached true democracy. Power is evil and when it is in the hands of a group of people it becomes an obstacle to democracy. For example, in the Arab Spring a country such as the US implied that the Arab Spring could result in democracy. However, in the same country in which the Arab Spring took place, for example, Egypt, a coup d'état could happen and the US would accept it. This has a negative effect on the notion of democracy in my opinion. You feel this has been a game all along for the benefit of a certain group. Other examples of interventions in Arab Spring in the name of democracy include Libya and Syria.

The above quotations illustrate how some women, regardless of being secularist or religious, distrust the role of the West and capitalism in establishing democracy in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East.

In this section, I discussed how in the view of most of the women who were not conservative the role of religion is significant in being a barrier to democracy. Notably, the economic situation of Iran was also seen as an obstacle, as participants argued that the lack of welfare system and oil income might also act as a barrier. Within their discussion, the role of the West was seen as a negative influence on the economic structure identified by some secular, reformist and conservative women. While some scholars such as for example Gellner (1983), Huntington (1993), Rowley and Smith (2009), Potrafke (2012) and Tezcür *et al.* (2012) have argued that there is a

significant negative association between Islam and democracy, others for example Collins and Owen (2012), Tessler (2002) and Karatnycky (2002) fail to accept this correlation and argue that the link is more complicated in an Islamic country. For example, Karatnycky (2002) questioned the notion that Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy, and instead points out that there is a negative relationship between natural resource wealth, such as oil and gas, and democracy in the Islamic world. Analysis of the data illustrates that in the women's views there are different factors, such as the particular political structure of Iran, the role of resources and the West, which have an influence on the democratic process in Iran. Moreover, it is significant that women from different groups shared similar ideas in terms of the role of the West as an obstacle to democracy. In the next section, I will discuss which aspects the women considered might be influential on the process of democracy in a positive way.

Potential enabling factors for democracy

Most women, except those who were conservative, suggested various factors related to cultural change that could enable the Iranian system to move toward democracy. The majority of women talked about cultural transformation in Iranian society and a few emphasised the role of cultural change amongst political leaders. These factors overlapped.

As the history of Iran shows, civil society has not yet fully developed. The state has often considered the expansion of political and civil rights as 'un-Islamic' and, as such, threatening to the foundation of the state's ideological and political bases (Abootalebi, 2000). However, it is notable that the pressure of the state on the public sphere has been fluctuating since the Islamic revolution. As Abootalebi (2000) argues, a fairly large middle class has been created by socio-economic modernisation after the Islamic Revolution and the professional and intellectual community has taken advantage of any opportunity to press for civil rights. Especially during Khatami's time, the pressure and debate over civil society, Islamic leadership, politics and religion has been more tolerated. Also, the post-revolution generation, who were deprived of basic social freedoms and politicised by controversial events, have been

able to criticise state policies during Khatami's time. However, in Abbotalebi's view, these conditions do not imply that organised associations in Iran effectively influenced policy outcomes during that time. Indeed, for the majority of women activists, secular and religious reformist women, civil society is a key factor that would contribute to democracy in Iran. For example, Nazi, a self-defined Islamic feminist, argued:

I think that revolution does not work in Iran. Rather, I think the best way to create the reform necessary for the transition to democracy is through civil society.

Similarly, Nadia, who identified herself as a secular feminist, said:

In order to move towards democracy, the role of civil society is vital. Civil activities, and strong civil protests which force the government to step back, are important so that people can breathe.

In the majority of the respondents' views, the important components of civil society, including civic culture/cultural transformation, are the foundation of democracy. These women talked about civic culture amongst Iranian individuals. However, most of the participants, at the same time talked about another aspect of civic culture/cultural change linked to women's rights. They believed that this culture needs to be promoted by educating Iranian women about their rights. For these participants, women activists should have a role in cultural transformation amongst Iranian women to improve women's rights and lead to democratisation. Through grass-root levels, for example, Atena, who viewed herself as a religious women's rights activist, argued for the role of women activists in promoting awareness of women's issues among women, to inspire them to have more of a presence in the social sphere rather than, traditionally, staying at home:

I think that women activists can help the democratic process if they seriously attempt to promote awareness of women's issues and improvement of their situation, and also by encouraging women to be more active in society.

The above account is an illustration of how most of the women felt that in order to transition to democracy, it is necessary for women to leave behind the traditional

confines of kinship and become active in the modern public domain. It seems that the idea that cultural transformation contributes to democracy is seen as more practical and achievable for most of the women. They believed that cultural change has an important role to play in transitioning to democracy.

While the majority of the women focused more on grassroots, some religious reformist women who had political experience argued that cultural change amongst the political leaders is also an important factor in enabling democracy. In these women's view, there is a need for influential senior politicians to advocate for democratic practices/ideals. These women, who during the interviews talked about their experiences in the political system and the problems they faced within this realm, argued that a democratic system needs democratic governors.

To help understand why these participants who have been involved in the political system at key stages think the way they do, it is useful to highlight the Green Movement which has shaped their approach to democracy. As discussed in Chapter Two, many people who protested in the Green Movement were arrested and imprisoned and, importantly, the reformist leaders of this movement are, at the time of writing this thesis, still in prison. Within this context, some religious reformist women involved in the political realm highlighted the role of having a democratic leader in advocating democratisation. For example, Akram, who saw herself as a religious women's rights activist, talked about the particular characteristics of Khatami, the ex-president, such as 'tolerance of different ideas':

Also, for the institutionalisation of a democracy we require a series of practices. The most important action is the practice of democracy by political elites. When the slogan of Mr. Khatami is 'long live my opponent', he shows his commitment to democracy. When he says that someone whose ideas are against my own thoughts has his/her own right to live, or that someone who disagrees with me should not be removed from the face of the Earth, this is a manifestation of democracy. I witnessed his behaviour when I was in the political structure. He asked others to propose ideas and even if their thoughts were against his own notions, he accepted them happily. The tolerance of different ideas and opinions are all manifestations of democracy.

Akram admired Khatami's values and behaviour as a democratic leader who respected and tolerated opponents' ideas. Nahal, who had previously been an MP, made the same point by speaking about her case and her negative experiences in the political realm. For Nahal, a self-defined religious women's rights activist, who stated that she avoided using the word 'feminism' as she would be stigmatised in the political realm, democracy takes place when democrats appear in the political system:

Democracy is when people govern themselves through organisations that can facilitate this. In my opinion, democracy is complicated, and unfortunately it has been simplified in our country. We choose a representative for our country, but they do not know the meaning of this; they do not know what is expected of them. For democracy to be successful, it first needs elites and people who claim they want to establish democracy by becoming democrats.

The above accounts illustrate the importance of the democratic culture, for some religious reformist women, amongst political leaders who they perceive might enable democracy. As discussed in Chapter Two, Iranian society experienced good progress toward democracy during Khatami's time. Based on the experiences of these religious reformist women who had political experiences in the time that Iran had a promising democratic process, they argued that the democratic behaviour of political figures could impact positively on democratisation.

The analysis of the data also shows that there is a link with the democratic culture of the religious leaders for conservative women. For the majority of conservative women, 'Islamic democracy' or '*Mardom-salari-ye dini*', which is legitimised by *The Supreme Leader*, can be practised instead of democracy. This particular democracy was accepted by conservative women only to the extent that it does not oppose Islam:

The Quran has a democratic meaning, but not pure democracy. *The Supreme Leader* has a debate called '*Mardom-salari-ye dini*'. (Anoosh, a self-identifies conservative woman)

As discussed earlier, the conservative women believed that the state should be ruled by God's will and the role of *Supreme Leader* is significant for them. His position and ideas are highly respected by these women. The above quotation illustrates how the idea of Islamic democracy is accepted by conservative women because it was

legitimised by *The Supreme Leader*. This suggests that while the secular model of democracy is not supported by *The Supreme Leader*, his advocacy of an Islamic model influenced the conservative women and implies how the culture of leaders can be important in the democratic process. Some researchers such as Mainwaring (1992) have also highlighted how commitment to democracy, both in terms of behaviour and values, on the part of political elites plays an important role in democratisation. In their argument, a firm commitment to democracy on the part of political elites can make democracy possible. Moreover, as discussed, the role of cultural change is highlighted by women activists in the search for democracy. Similarly, some studies (e.g. Harik, 1994; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Tessler, 2002; Tohidi, 2016) emphasise the role of democratic values on the process of democracy.

Conclusion

There is a connection between where people sit in the continuum of beliefs, including secular, religious reformist and conservative women, and their views on whether Islam should be involved in democracy. The majority of the secular feminists and some of the religious reformist women who called themselves feminists and Islamic feminists, called for a secular democracy. For some religious reformist women, who called themselves religious women's rights activists, Islam is very important in protecting their values, including not supporting gay rights. However, they believed that the involvement of Islam in democracy should be minimal or very limited. For religious conservative women, however, Islam matters to such a degree that it should be central to democracy. Similarly, in their empirical study, Collins and Owen (2012) distinguished between secular democracy and Islamic democracy, because the former, in their view, has been ideally related to Western liberal theory, and the latter is a religiously-oriented democracy supported by many Muslim individuals and theories. By regarding Islamic democracy as a type of democracy, they show that religiosity influences the choice of Islamic democracy over secular democracy. While their study relates to Muslims and is not only limited to women activists, their idea is similar to the women's views in this research. Importantly, some of the participants, despite being from different backgrounds (secular, religious reformist and conservative) shared similar views on factors other than religion, such as oil resources and the

negative interference of the West, impacting on the democratic process in Iran. The negative associations between resources and democracy have also been highlighted in some studies (e.g. Herb, 2005; Ahmadov, 2014). Instead, most women believed that cultural change was a key factor in moving toward democracy. This is also illustrated by other scholars (e.g. Harik, 1994; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Tessler, 2002; Tohidi, 2016) who focus on the importance of political cultures, including the beliefs and values of ordinary citizens, in the process of democratisation. In addition, in questioning Western democracy, secular feminists pointed to economic inequality between men and women and the exploitation of women, suggesting that they seek a secular model of democracy that is a non-gendered, non-Western and non-Islamic.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusions

Introduction

I began to investigate studies and literature related to feminists and women activists in Iran. By interviewing forty seven women in one to one semi-structured interviews, I collected rich data to respond to my research questions. I examined the characteristics of Iranian feminists and women activists and their views about gender equality and democracy by exploring their views about the terms feminist and feminism, the ways that they understood and prioritised gender equality, and their perspectives about secular and Islamic democracy and its possibilities in Iran.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section One summarises the key findings. I will discuss the typology of the feminists and women activists of this study and their strategies to improve women's rights. The variety of strategies of the participants, including secular and religious reformist women and religious conservatives, will be elaborated in this section. In Section Two, I describe the contribution of this research to the existing literature and discuss how some of the findings support and reinforce existing studies, while others help to fill gaps in existing empirical research and studies. Section Three discusses suggestions for further study. Finally, in Section Four, I explain the limitations I have faced in conducting this research.

Summary of key findings

This thesis answered the research questions by examining the characteristics of feminists and women activists in Iran, the ways that these women prioritised women's rights and understood gender equality and their notions about democracy. In terms of the characteristics of women, the three categories that emerged from the research are: secular feminists, religious reformist women (including women who called themselves as feminist, Islamic feminist and religious women's rights activists) and religious conservative women. These categories are an important research finding of this thesis. I explained in chapters Three and Four that these categories developed through the analysis of the initial stage of the fieldwork based on how women

identified themselves within the interviews. Moreover, this typology not only helped me to structure the sample of the second and third stages of the fieldwork, this was also used as an analytical tool to understand different positions taken by the participants about different strategies such as being feminist and the notions of fair society, gender equality and democracy.

To address the characteristics of feminists and women activists, as discussed in the data chapters, the participants had a spectrum of beliefs and strategies to improve women's status in Iran. Religious reformist women in this research, including all those who identified themselves as feminist, Islamic feminist and religious women's rights activists, advocated a re-interpretation of the Quran to improve women status. These participants also supported human rights to differing degrees. When we look at the religious conservative women's arguments, although they argued that women's rights should be improved within an Islamic framework in a traditional way and without re-interpreting the Quran, they were uncomfortable with male conservative gender policies and sought a new approach to advocate women's rights in the framework of Islam. In contrast, secular feminists had different strategies and argued that the Iranian political system and religion should be separated. These interviewees believed that legal codes need to be in accordance with human rights rather than the Islamic framework. Here, I discuss, in turn, the participants' beliefs and strategies about feminists and feminism, gender equality, and democracy in relation to the typology of this research.

Secular feminists, religious reformist women, and religious conservative women took different positions in terms of being feminists and supporting feminism. As there is a stigma around the terms feminist and feminism, particularly among political and religious conservative leaders, some of the religious reformist women, alongside all the conservative women, preferred not to be identified as feminist. Those religious reformist women who engaged with politics preferred to be defined as religious women's rights activists rather than feminists. The existing gender politics impacted on the language and strategy that these religious reformist women apply to improving women's rights (Chapter Four). This becomes clearer when they advocated gender

equality in line with other women who identified themselves as feminists (Chapter Five). The contradiction between their dis-identification with the label ‘feminist’ and their defence of women’s rights in ways similar to women who did identify as ‘feminists’ highlights the current field of possibility within which these women work in Iran. However, the stigma around the terms feminist and feminism had a strong influence, and to some extent had been re-created by conservative women. They re-inforce this stigma because of their beliefs and perspectives on a re-interpretation of Islam, secularity, and the West. This position has the potential to limit their room to advocate women’s rights and link themselves with feminists in Iran. In spite of the existence of problematic issues with the terms feminist and feminism, all secular feminists and some religious reformist women who are not involved in the political sphere called themselves, respectively, secular feminists and Islamic feminists. In order to reduce the risks involved in feminist activities, these categories of women managed their visibilities in different historical periods in relation to political shifts between conservatism and reformism. That is, they were less likely to publicly associate themselves with feminist approaches during times of conservative rule.

While secular feminists and religious reformist women theoretically advocated human rights, in practice they prioritised women’s rights in accordance with the Iranian context. To address the ways that feminists and women activists prioritised women’s rights, this study illustrated that secular feminists and religious reformist women shared the same priorities about improving women’s rights and both legal and cultural equality are supported by these women. However, they avoided giving priority to contested rights in Iran, such as choosing to wear the *Hijab* and gay rights. In contrast, religious conservative women disagreed with the idea of equal rights and they prioritised women’s rights as defined in the Quran and tradition. Notably, this priority is also not in line with male conservatives’ views. For these women, tensions remain around particular issues such as the right of divorce for women, and the legal testimony of women in the court. Moreover, compared with male conservatives, they were more flexible in terms of the inclusion of women in the public sphere.

Feminists and women activists in this study shared different ideas about gender equality. Most participants, including secular feminists and some religious reformist women who identified themselves as Islamic feminists, called for gender equality. However, some religious reformist women, who defined themselves as religious women's rights activists, talked about gender justice rather than gender equality. For these women, using the term gender justice enabled them to differentiate themselves from other feminists in Iran who called for gender equality. In fact, they applied different language from Iranian feminists; however, there were not significant differences between the views of these women and other secular feminists and religious reformist women also calling for gender equality. Importantly, conservative women disagreed with both of the terms of gender equality and genders justice. These women believed that women's rights should be practiced in accordance with Quran without any reinterpretations.

In terms of their views and strategies about democracy, most of the participants, including secular feminist and religious reformist women, argued that democracy should be secular – to differing degrees based on participants' beliefs – and non-Western. They believed that Iran is far from being a 'full' democracy, and in order to move toward democratisation they argued that cultural change is a key factor. However, in religious conservative women's views, democracy should be Islamic and keep its current status quo. Importantly, all participants with distinct beliefs viewed factors such as oil and the West as having a negative impact on the process of democracy (see Chapter Six).

While there are some differences between religious conservative women on one hand and religious reformist women and secular feminists on the other, they share similar ideas and strategies. For example, they all disagree with the gender politics supported by conservative males and with copying the Western version of democracy in Iran. These findings demonstrate that participants with a spectrum of beliefs and strategies share much in common, as, within their women's rights work, all of these women are responding to the possibilities and limitations of pursuing such work in the context of Iran. Analysis of participants' accounts indicated that all participants have their own

beliefs and strategies that resulted from the particularity of their context. Their particular strategies and prioritisations illustrate that participants, including secular feminists, religious reformist women and religious conservative women, are home-grown feminists and women activists who take their own context and beliefs into consideration when advocating women's rights (Tohidi, 2016).

Contribution to knowledge

The research to date has tended to focus on secular and Islamic feminists. Using the term Islamic feminists in these studies was limited to religious reformist women, and so the studies failed to consider/include religious conservative women. While a small number of studies (e.g. Afray, 1997; Mojab, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006) acknowledge the existence of religious conservative women in Iran, their interest, involvement in and significance to activism focused on women's position in society are ignored in these studies. This means that the existing typology within the current literature is unable to capture the identities of the participants in this research. In contrast, this study explored different set of categories and typologies of women's activism that were developed through the analysis of the interviews and based on how women identified themselves. This typology, including secular feminists, religious reformists and religious conservative women, is a significant contribution to the existing literature. Moreover, the perspectives of different categories of women acted as a means of analysing the participants' ideas on key concepts and issues such as feminism, women's rights, gender equality and democracy. Analysis of the women's accounts illustrated that, despite the differences between participants with a variety of identities, they all disagreed with the limited gender policies advocated by male political and religious leaders, particularly conservatives. In addition, they are all home-grown feminists and women activists who use a variety of strategies to improve women's rights. Similarly, Tohidi (2016) placed emphasis on this idea and argued that due to national and international push and pull factors, Iranian feminists and women activists have maintained their home-grown roots.

Most literature has mentioned that feminists and women activists in Iran have different strategies to improve women's rights (e.g. Mir- Hoseini, 1996; Badran,

2002; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2006; Tohidi, 2016). However, this research study elaborates participants' strategies in detail on distinct issues, such as being feminist and supporting feminism, women's rights, gender equality, and democracy. Analysis of the data indicates that women took different strategies to improve women's status in Iran. These strategies include women's attachment to, or distance from, the terms feminist and feminism, the re-interpretation of the Quran, the language they use to advocate gender equality, the ways they prioritise certain women's rights, and their approach to contributing to democracy.

In terms of the strategies that the women adopted about the terms feminist and feminism, a review of feminist and gender studies research suggests that there is hardly any research which explores the different positions that feminists and women activists in Iran take regarding the application of these terms. However, this study illustrated that the self-definition of being feminist and supporting feminism is not only associated with the participants' beliefs, but also with the strategies they take to improve women's rights.

For example, participants who avoided identifying themselves as 'feminist' talked about how this term is problematic. Some religious reformist women and religious conservative women argued that calling themselves 'feminist' is problematic, and they raised different issues associated with the terms feminist and feminism. Conservative women associated feminists and feminism with 'problematic issues,' such as the West, secularity and the rights of women over their own body. However, some religious reformist women involved in the political sphere preferred not to be identified as 'feminists' due to the limited gender politics existing in Iran. These women talked about the different strategies and languages they needed to apply in order to improve women's rights in Iran. This suggests that at heart they might consider themselves feminist, but publicly identified themselves as religious women's rights activists due to the particular context in which they are working. Despite the importance of the terms feminist and feminists, the problematic issues around using these terms, alongside the differences between self-definitions of women's rights

activists and feminists, have been overlooked within the existing literature (Povey, 2001; Ahmadi, 2006; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008).

All religious reformist women in this study argued that re-interpretation of the Quran is essential in order to reach to a fair society. This approach had a positive influence on the flexibility of religious reformist women on their views about feminists and feminism, gender equality, human rights and secular democracy. This finding adds to the debate around the associations between Islamic feminists and religious women's rights activists with western feminism, and reinforces the assertions of some scholars (e.g. Najmabadi, 1998; Ahmadi, 2006) who suggest that religious reformist women detach themselves from the ideas of 'West phobia' (Ahmadi, 2006: 33). Similar to these studies, this research illustrates that religious reformist women, through their strategy of re-interpreting the Quran, have opened the door and woven new connections to western feminism, secular feminism, and human rights.

The analysis of this study indicates that religious reformist women, after the Islamic Revolution, changed their trust in and loyalty to the state, and took different strategies including the re-interpretation of Islam and supporting reformist politicians, such as Khatami, to be able to negotiate women's rights using reformist language with them. Similarly, Rostami Povey (2001) argued that Islamic feminists and religious women's rights activists changed their loyalty to the state, especially male conservative politicians. However, she failed to examine the strategies women took to improve women's rights in detail.

While religious reformist women changed their faithfulness to the male conservative politicians and became disappointed with their *gender policies*, they still needed to prove to the political system that they were neither against Islam nor following the West. Therefore, religious reformist women in this study argued that they need to apply different approaches to prove that they are indeed indigenous women activists. Some preferred to re-interpret the Quran based on human rights. However, others believed that women's rights should be improved through the process of re-interpretation of Islam; they also proved their loyalty to the system by calling for religious resources rather than human rights for women's rights. Similarly, scholars

have highlighted the need for feminists and women activists in Iran to show loyalty as insider women (Moghadam, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Tohidi, 2016; Mir-Hosseini et al., 2015). However, this study went further and analysed the strategies they applied and to what extent participants advocated human rights.

In spite of the existence of literature about Islamic and secular feminists in Iran, there is hardly any research exploring how feminists and women activists from a spectrum beliefs and strategies including secular, reformist, and conservative women, prioritise women's rights in Iran. Therefore, this thesis has explored the way that interviewees gave priority to women's rights in Iran. Analysis of the data showed that secular feminists and religious reformist women defended gender equality with a variety of strategies. However, these participants avoided prioritising a few contested rights such as choosing to wear the *Hijab* and gay rights. In contrast, conservative participants did not share the same priority with secular feminists and religious reformist women.

The research findings illustrate that secular feminists and religious reformist women were both concerned with legal and cultural equality. These women's arguments about the necessity of improving women's rights in both legal and cultural domains illustrated the complexity of the context along with their attempts to improve both cultural and legal equality. This finding is in contrast with most studies that have focused only on the role of Iranian feminists and women activists on legal change rather than cultural inequality. Only a very few authors (e.g. Mojab, 2001) have highlighted the importance of cultural change; however, they have claimed that legal change is the primary issue for Islamic feminists and women activists. In contrast, this study has shown that inequality in cultural domains is the concern of secular feminists and religious reformist women, including Islamic feminists and religious women's rights activists.

Despite the importance of women's views about democracy and its possibilities in Iran, the existing literature on women and democracy in Islamic countries, including Iran, fail to address this issue. This study contributed to the literature about feminism

and democracy by considering the participants' views over whether democracy should be secular or Islamic and how far Iran is from being a 'full' democracy. Most of the women including secular feminists and religious reformist women preferred a secular version of democracy; however, to differing extents. Moreover, these women believed that Iran is far from being a 'full' democracy. In contrast, religious conservative women called for Islamic democracy. This type of 'democracy' matches the current 'democratic system' in Iran. While there were different views on Islamic democracy and secular democracy, all participants shared the same ideas about the negative impact of distinct factors such as oil resources and the negative interference of the West on the process of democracy. This view of the participants is in contrast with some secular views (e.g. Gellner, 1983; Huntington, 1993; Rowly and Smith, 2009; Potrafke, 2012; Tezcur et al., 2012) which argue that religion is the only factor influencing the process of democracy.

Further study directions

As discussed throughout this thesis, Iran is a country that has limited gender politics, and the role of women activists on cultural change to improve gender equality and democratic system is highly significant. Future studies might usefully examine the ways through which Iranian feminists and women activists attempt to fight against cultural inequalities such as the assumption that women should be financially dependent on men and the 'male bread winner model'. As this unequal cultural assumption is the root of much discrimination and encourages women to remain in the private sphere, investigating this subject would enable understanding of the extent, and via which strategies, feminists and women activists attempt to raise women consciousness of this issue. Iran is a country in which, despite the high rate of educated women, the rate of employed women is surprisingly very low; therefore, examining women activists' attempts to enhance women's awareness about the importance of being financially independent and equal with men may be significant.

In addition, I would also like to make suggestions to other researchers considering women activists' voices and ideas in terms of their self-identification. Analysis of the studies related to Iranian women activists illustrates that there is a lack of attention to

Iranian women's views on the label feminist (see Chapter Two). This thesis proposes that researchers who work on feminists and women activists in Iran be more conscious of labelling women activists in Iran, as they might not accept this attachment. Instead of attributing the term feminist to all women activists in Iran, they can use terms like feminists and women activists to show their attention to the self-identification of women. While this strategy has been seen in a few studies (e.g Afshar, 1996; Tohidi, 2016), most only identify women activists as feminists and limit the space in which women can express their identity.

Other studies can also contribute to women studies by acknowledging the existence of different women activists with a variety of beliefs, including conservative women activists. As discussed in Chapter Two, most studies ignore the role of conservative women in Iran and even avoid mentioning them in their studies. While the views of conservative women in Iran might not be in line with other women activists' ideas, they do exist in Iran and they attempt to challenge male conservative views. Their existence within studies on women activists in Iran should at least acknowledge the need for a more detailed contextualisation, in order to improve understanding of the wider picture.

Research Limitations

Research in the area of feminists and women activists is a sensitive and contested subject, not only in developed countries but also in developing societies. This issue in the socio-political context of Iran is even more controversial. As discussed in Chapter Two, religious conservative politicians associate feminist/ism with the West, and this assumption has led them to problematic and discriminatory gender politics. This limitation has also influenced me as a woman researcher during this PhD. From the literature review stage to data collection and fieldwork, I have dealt with several different types of challenge, for example, the lack of Iranian literature in relation to this topic in addition to operational challenges regarding conducting such a sensitive topic in the very contested gender political context of Iran, which may not be the case for research conducted in other contexts such as the UK.

Another point which I want to reflect on is the difficulties of avoiding the implementation of a comparative study. I tried to avoid attaching particular values to different strategies and views supported by the participants of this study. Also, as explained in Chapter One, the aim of this research was not to compare women's views with different beliefs in Iran. Instead, this research focused on the perspectives of Iranian feminists and women activists in terms of their political identity and priorities. Through this process, I attempted to adhere to the aims of this study under the supervision of both my supervisors.

Appendix A: Interview schedule used for the first stage of the fieldwork

<p>What is distinctive about Islamic and secular feminism? What are their characteristics?</p>	<p>What is distinctive about Islamic and secular feminism's notions of women rights?</p>	<p>What kinds of democracy do Islamic and religious feminists propose?</p>
<p>1. How was your upbringing? - Would you describe it as mostly religious or mostly secular? - How was that for you? - Has your family background and upbringing influenced the ways you think as a feminist?</p> <p>2. What was your family experience in relation to how gender roles were distributed in your house? How did your mum and dad decide things?</p>	<p>12. Several days ago some dancers who were Iranian girls and boys were arrested as they danced in a clip in which girls did not have <i>Hijab</i>. What is your view on that?</p> <p>-Were they guilty of something?</p> <p>-If so why? (because of being unveiling or dancing)</p> <p>-If not why?</p>	<p>24. What does the term democracy mean to you? -Where do your ideas about this come from do you think?</p> <p>25. How do you think Iranian feminists can impact toward democratization? -Do you think democracy is an important issue in your agenda as a feminist?</p>

<p>3. (If participant indicates they are married on the form) How are decisions made in your household?</p> <p>- is one of you more leader than another?</p> <p>-can you think of specific examples?</p> <p>4. Are some gender differences a matter of nature? Are there some things that should be the responsibility of men and some the responsibility of women?</p> <p>5. What is the view of Quran on women?</p>	<p>13. A woman could not be a president, minister, religious reference and member of Assembly of Experts in Iran, What are your views on that?</p> <p>14. In Islamic laws women are considered as someone who is dependent economically to men, in which ways you think this impact on women's roles in the family?</p> <p>-In the society?</p> <p>- Do you think this influence is positive or negative?</p> <p>15. Iranian women need their husband's permission for working in the society and also for continuing their education.</p>	<p>-Is democratisation something you are interested in?</p> <p>26. Which kinds of laws do you prefer? Why?</p> <p>- laws according to the Quran</p> <p>- Laws according to human rights?</p> <p>-Laws according to Islamic human rights? What is this?</p> <p>27. Does interpretation of Quran help to the democratic process? If so in which ways? If not why?</p>
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<p>6. Can you tell me a little about how you came to be a feminist activist?</p> <p>- When did it happen?</p> <p>- Was there a particular event or experience or person that led you to get involved in feminism? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?</p> <p>- What did you want achieve?</p> <p>7. Why it is important to be a feminist?</p> <p>- Have your feminist values and priorities changed over time, in what way?</p>	<p>-Why is that do you think?</p> <p>- Do you think it matters, could it be different?</p> <p>-Would that be a good thing?</p> <p>16. Googoosh (a famous Iranian singer) sang a song, called Behesht, in advocating lesbian's rights. What is your idea about this song?</p> <p>Drawing from your feminist beliefs what do you think about how these laws treat women? Would you like to see them change, in what way, how might you/other feminists go about changing them?</p> <p>17. The amount of "blood-money" to be paid to the family of a murdered woman which is stipulated should be half the amount payable to the family of a murdered man.</p>	<p>28. What is Islamic democracy?</p> <p>29. If collective decision (parliament) would make a decision which is in contrast with the Sharia, in your view which of them is more important?</p> <p>-How do you balance the authority of god with the authority of the people?</p> <p>30. Do you think all Iranian must have equal rights?</p> <p>-If so do you think that matters if a Cristian person be a president? If not why?</p> <p>31. Which one of the following powers should make a decision for a country: parliament or supreme leader of Iran?</p>
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<p>8. What should be the key goals for the feminist movement in Iran?</p> <p>9. What does gender equality mean to you?</p> <p>- Do you think other feminists in Iran would define gender equality in the same way?</p> <p>- In which ways are your ideas different, why is that do you think?</p> <p>10. Is there a way you would describe the type of feminist you are?</p> <p>- Do categories such as secular feminist or religious feminist help to describe your type of feminism? How?</p>	<p>18. In court, women's legal testimonies are valued less than a man's and in some cases worth nothing unless corroborated by a man</p> <p>19. polygamy is allowed in Iran</p> <p>20. Child custody</p> <p>21. The share of a woman in inheritance</p> <p>22. Without the permission of husbands, women legally are forbidden to travel abroad.</p> <p>23. Women do not have the right of divorce</p>	<p>32. If your vote was different with your religious reference, would it impact on your own decision for voting?</p> <p>33. In spite of the agreement of sixth parliament with joining to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Guardian Council rejected this. What do you think about this controversial story?</p>
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<p>- Are they categories that are meaningful to describe feminism in Iran and differences between feminists? If so how, If not why?</p> <p>11. Are there things that you have seen change because of feminist activity in Iran?</p> <p>-What things?</p> <p>- Were you involved in that?</p> <p>- If things haven't changed, or just to some extent, why do you think that is?</p>		
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Appendix B: Interview schedule used for the second and third stages of the fieldwork

The characteristics of secular and religious feminists and women activist

1. Can you tell me a little about your upbringing?

- Would you describe it as mostly religious or mostly secular?

- How was that for you?

- Has your family background and upbringing influenced the ways you think as a feminist or woman activist?

2. What was your family experience in relation to how gender roles were distributed in your house? How did your mum and dad decide things?

3. (If participant indicates they are married on the form) How are decisions made in your household?

- is one of you more of a leader than another?

- does it depend on the issue?

-can you think of specific examples?

- is it the same as the time that you used to live in Iran?

4. Can you tell me a little about how you came to be a feminist or woman activist?

- When did it happen?

- Was there a particular event or experience or person that led you to get involved in feminism or women activist? Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

- What did you want achieve?

5. Why is it important to be a feminist or woman activist?

6. What should be the key goals for the feminists' and women activists' movement in Iran?

7. Is there a way you would describe the type of feminist or women activist you are?

8. Do categories such as secular or religious feminists or women activists help to describe your type of feminism or activism? How?

- Are they categories that are meaningful to describe feminists and women activists in Iran and differences between them? If so how, If not why?

-If it is meaningful to you, what is your opinions about other kind of feminism and activism (secular/religious)?

- If it is meaningful, how do you work together?

Participants' idea regarding transition to democracy

9- How do you think Iranian laws, related to women such as polygamy, permission of husband to work outside, are practising in the society?

- In your opinion how extent Iranian laws such as polygamy, are in accordance with our culture?

10. What does the term democracy mean to you?

- What is your idea regarding the possibilities of democracy in Iran?

- What kinds of factors may help to the process of democratization?

-How do you think Iranian feminists and women activists can impact toward democratization?

How do you think Iranian feminists and women activists can impact toward democratization?

-Do you think democracy in Iran is an important issue in your agenda as a feminist and women activist?

-Is democratisation something you are interested in?

Political changes that coming through between secular and religious feminists and activists

12. What does gender equality mean to you?

- Do you think other feminists and women activists in Iran would define gender equality in the same way?
- In which ways are your ideas different, why is that do you think?
- What is the meaning of “justice” that some Iranian Muslim feminists and women activists speak about?

13. Do you think all Iranian women for instance Kurdish, Baluch and other women from different ethics should have the same rights? Why do you think like that?

14. Are some gender differences a matter of nature? Are there some things that should be the responsibility of men and some the responsibility of women?

15-How much should the state say about how people should live their lives?

- How strong should welfare provision be?
- Which one is more important for you: providing people with welfare by government or not government intervene?
- do you think the Iranian government can arrest the boys and girls who participate in private parties because of either dancing or *Hijab*?

16. What is the view of Quran on women?

-What is your interpretation based on?

-Is that a common interpretation do you think?

-Is it a matter of debate what the Quran says about women?

Which kinds of laws do you prefer? Why?

- laws according to the Quran

- Laws according to human rights?

-Laws according to Islamic human rights? What is this?

17.(applicable for Muslim feminists and women activists) How extend do you think Iranian women's rights could be in accordance with human's rights?

- In what ways do you agree/disagree with human's rights? Why you think like that?

18. Does interpretation of Quran help to the democratic process? If so in which ways? If not why?

-do you think reformist's understanding of religion had the positive impact on women's situation and women's rights? How was the situation of women activists and feminists during Khatami's time?-was it different compared with conservative time? In what ways?

- In spite of the agreement of sixth parliament with joining to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Guardian Council rejected this. What do you think about this controversial story?

19. What is Islamic democracy?

-What is your view on that?

20. (This question only applicable for religious women) If collective decision (parliament) would make a decision which is in contrast with the Sharia, in your view which of them is more important?

-How do you balance the authority of god with the authority of the people?

21. Do you think all Iranians must have equal rights?

-If so do you think that matters if a Cristian person be a president? If not why?

22- How do you prioritise the following women's issues in your work? Why?

-women's education in any field

-women's working in the society

-improve the access of women to political arena

-women allows to divorce men

-fighting with domestic violence

In Islamic laws women are considered as someone who is dependent economically to men, in which ways you think does this impact on women's roles in the family?

-In the society?

- Do you think this influence is positive or negative?

23. Iranian women need their husband's permission for working in the society and also for continuing their education.

-Why is that do you think?

Drawing from your feminist or women activist beliefs what do you think about how these laws treat women? Would you like to see them change, in what way, how might you/other feminists and women activists go about changing them?

24. In court, women's legal testimonies are valued less than a man's and in some cases worth nothing unless corroborated by a man

25. polygamy is allowed in Iran

26. Women do not have the right of divorce

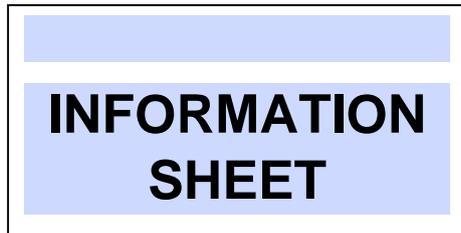
27. Age of marriage for girl is 13

28. What is your idea about women can be arrested by police in streets if they do not have “proper *Hijab*”?

If your vote was different with your religious reference, would it impact on your own decision for voting?

Do you have any question that you would like to ask me?

Appendix C: Information Sheet



School of Geography, Politics and Sociology

Title of the Project- Iranian women rights activists and notions of democracy in contemporary Iran

Researcher-Pardis Asadi Zeidabadi, PhD researcher

Contact Details –p.asadi-zeidabadi@newcastle.ac.uk
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School of Geography, Politics &
Sociology,

Newcastle University,

5th Floor Claremont Tower,
Claremont Rd,

I am conducting sociological research as part of a PhD at Newcastle University. This sheet tells you about the research I am doing and what will happen if you decide to take part. Please take time to read and understand the information. Do not hesitate to ask any questions that you may have regarding taking part in the project. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Purpose of the study

The general objective of this research is to carry out an empirical exploration of the conceptions of democracy held by women rights activists in Iran. I am interested in exploring the relationship between inequality and notions of democracy from the viewpoint of women activists in Iran. I want to assess the divergent conceptions of democracy in women rights activists and examine the obstacles and possibilities that these conceptions pose to these women activists seeking to work together and attain the common goals of women empowerment and gender equality.

Participating in the study

If you agree to take part in the study, a one-to-one interview will be arranged at a mutually convenient time and place. The interview will be audio recorded if you agree and will last between one and two hours.

You may end the interview at any time you wish and if you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so. You will have the chance to ask me any questions you have about the study and you will be asked to sign a consent form.

Ethical use of data

Any names, places or personal information discussed will be made anonymous in such a way that you will not be identifiable. All personal information and contact details will remain confidential. You are not obliged to answer questions or reveal personal information if you choose not to.

The audio recordings and transcripts will be kept securely at the university. The audio files will be erased completely at the end of the project and the transcripts will be kept by the researcher. A copy of the transcript can be made available upon request and free of charge.

Your contribution to the study will be used for academic purposes only. Your comments may be quoted in the PhD thesis or in academic publications but they will be made anonymous.

Research details

The name of the project and my contact details appear at the head of this information sheet. If you would like any further information about me or about taking part in this study, please contact the project supervisors who will be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have.

Contact details of the supervisors

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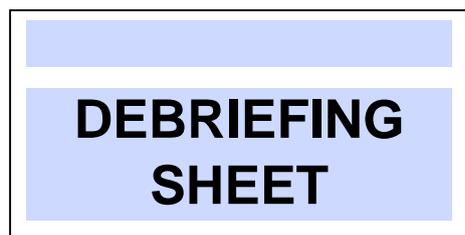
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Appendix D: Debriefing Sheet



School of Geography, Politics and Sociology

Title of the Project – Iranian women rights activists and notions of democracy in contemporary Iran

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Thank you for taking part in this study. Your generosity in sharing your time, experiences and thoughts are greatly appreciated. This debriefing sheet describes in greater detail the aims of the project and also tells you how you can receive updates on the progress of the study.

Aims of the project

The general objective of this research is to carry out an empirical exploration of women rights activists and notions of democracy in contemporary Iran.

Iran is a country in which women are denied any meaningful participation in political institutions. Within this context, I am interested in exploring the relationship between inequality and notions of democracy from the viewpoint of women rights activists in Iran. I want to assess the divergent conceptions of democracy in women rights activists and examine the obstacles and possibilities that these conceptions pose to these women seeking to work together and attain the common goals of women empowerment and gender equality. The women's movement at the turn of the twenty first century potentially can play a role shaping the direction of democratic processes in Iran, at a time when moves towards democracy appear to be at a crucial stage.

Progress of the study

You can choose to stay in touch with the researcher by post, email, or on Facebook (by private message). You are welcome to contact the researcher at any time to discuss your participation in the project or the progress of the study.

Research details

The name of the project and the contact details for the researcher appear at the head of this information sheet. If you would like any further information about the researcher or about taking part in this study, please contact the project supervisors who will be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have.

Contact details of the supervisors

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Appendix E: Consent Form



School of Geography, Politics and Sociology

Title of the Project- Conceptions of democracy in secular and religious feminism in contemporary Iran

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Taking part in the research

Please
Tick

I agree to take part in the project.

I have read and understood the information sheet for the project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reasons.

I agree to the interview being audio recorded.

I understand that my personal details will be confidential and will not be revealed to anyone outside the project except the researcher.

Use of the information I provide for this project

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.

I understand that my real name will not be used in any publications and that data will be made anonymous.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

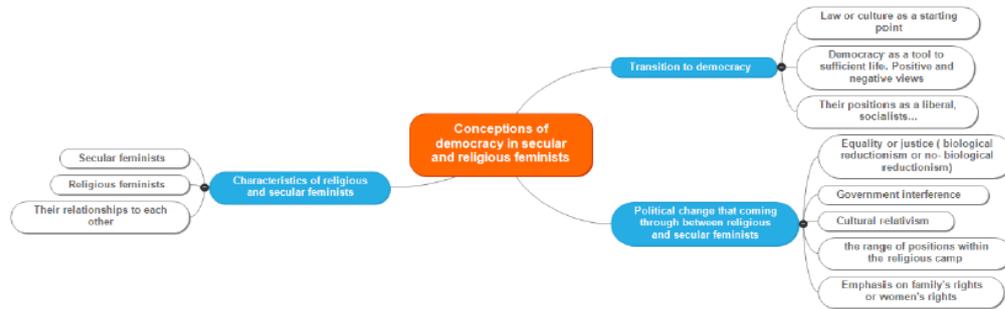
Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix F: List of Analytical codes after first and second stages of fieldwork

Conceptions of democracy in secular and religious feminists



- 1. Transition to democracy 2**
 - 1.1. Law or culture as a starting point 2
 - 1.2. Democracy as a tool to sufficient life. Positive and negative views 2
 - 1.3. Their positions as a liberal, socialists..... 2
- 2. Political change that coming through between religious and secular feminists 2**
 - 2.1. Equality or justice (biological reductionism or no- biological reductionism) 2
 - 2.2. Government interference..... 2
 - 2.3. Cultural relativism 2
 - 2.4. the range of positions within the religious camp 2
 - 2.5. Emphasts on family's rights or women's rights..... 2
- 3. Characteristics of religious and secular feminists 2**
 - 3.1. Secular feminists 2
 - 3.2. Religious feminists 2
 - 3.3. Their relationships to each other 2

1. Transition to democracy

- 1.1. Law or culture as a starting point
- 1.2. Democracy as a tool to sufficient life. Positive and negative views
- 1.3. Their positions as a liberal, socialists...

2. Political change that coming through between religious and secular feminists

- 2.1. Equality or justice (biological reductionism or no- biological reductionism)
- 2.2. Government interference
- 2.3. Cultural relativism
- 2.4. the range of positions within the religious camp
- 2.5. Emphasis on family's rights or women's rights

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