

PUBLIC SPACES OF 'FREEDOM': THE EMERGENCE OF GENDER-EXCLUSIVE PARKS IN TEHRAN

Shahrzad Shirvani

University of California, Berkeley

“A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*.”¹

In recent years, the municipality of Tehran has been increasingly engaged in constructing public spaces, including parks and green areas in the capital city. Tehran's Parks and Green Spaces Organization, which works under the auspices of the municipality, announced the main objectives of its new projects on its website:

1. Heidegger, Martin. 1975. “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Colophon ed, 143–59. His Works Collection. New York: Harper & Row, 152.

Management, development, maintenance, and supervision of public open spaces, recreation centers, tourist resorts, parks, and urban greenbelts in cooperation and collaboration with the governmental, public and civil organizations, and participation of the Tehrani citizens according to the rules and regulations of the ratified master plan and ratified detailed plans.²



Figure 1: Location of Mother's Paradise in Tehran. The red arrows point towards the entrance gates. (source: Google Maps)

None of these objectives addresses the issue of gender segregation in general. However, in 2007, the inauguration of the first women-exclusive park called Mother's Paradise (Behesht-e Mâdarân) in Abbas Abad Hills of Tehran caused controversy [Map 1]. This was the first time since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution that women were allowed to be present in public without a veil. The new gendered zone is highly policed and controlled from both inside and outside the fences. It is protected within its walls, which separate the inner public space from the outside, creating at the same time an area of isolation and *freedom*. Heidegger's assertion shows that it is from this

2. Taken from the official Tehran Municipality website, retrieved from <http://parks.tehran.ir/default.aspx?tabid=204>.

bounded territory that new problems start to rise. The walled landscape, on one hand, initiates and forms a new kind of ‘freedom’ under the repressions of the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, it intends to form a new type of citizenship based on the conservative government’s desirable coding for what they consider “Iranian-Islamic Culture,” an invented legacy that has been promulgated extensively by the government in the past two decades. Further elaboration on this legacy requires a discussion on the importance of national identity in the contemporary history of Iran.

The Iran–Iraq war (1980 to 1988) and the death of the supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, plunged the Islamic Republic into a crisis of national identity and self-representation. Gradual detachment of the Islamic state and the nation, particularly the young generation who were born after the Revolution, alerted the conservative government to rethink the importance of ‘identity.’³ A few years after the war, Iran’s second supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, with the help of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, invented a legacy of “Iranian-Islamic” culture and lifestyle to reconstruct the fragmented social order. The assumption was that by changing the urban space, a new generation could be produced. However, the embedded duality of ‘Iranian’ and ‘Islamic’ left the combined term ‘Iranian-Islamic’ indeterminate. In using the term ‘duality,’ I argue that the Iranian-Islamic legacy became a mediator between peoples’ nationalist mindsets that was remained from the dynastic Pahlavi era (1925 to 1979) and the conservative Shi’ite ideologies of the Islamic Republic (Ansari, 2012).⁴ This combination gradually started to produce a new culture of representation in architecture and urban design. The legacy thus became part of a larger mission for the state: construction of a new national identity for a young nation that was experiencing an ideological transformation.

3. In the early days after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that the Islamic state and the nation should stay together to prevent dictatorship. The Supreme Leader’s complete speech is accessible on the digital archive of International Affairs Department of The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini’s Works, retrieved from <http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/n22974/>. The Institute was first established by Ayatollah Khomeini’s son Ahmad and continued its progress under the supervision of Khomeini’s grandson and close relatives. See also Abrahamian, E. (1993). *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 19-38.

4. Reza Shah’s nationalist views underpinned a political movement aimed at the transformation of national identity in Iran. He emphasized the notion of “pre-Islamic Persian civilization and culture.” I will elaborate in the Historical Background section, below. A synthesis of his ideas manifested in terms of Iranian culture and the Islamic conservative government’s attempts to revitalize Islamic culture eventually led to coinage of the term “Iranian-Islamic culture,” which contributed to the distinctive nature of Iranian nationalism and Iranian Islamism in a Shi’ite tradition.



Figure 2. Borders that territorialize the gender-segregated area of Mother's Paradise Park from surrounding environment. (source: by author)

In a search for a solid definition of Iranian-Islamic identity and culture, I looked to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance website (www.farhang.gov).⁵ The 5th and 12th principles under *Content Strategies* emphasize “the attributes of Iranian-Islamic identity” and “Iranian-Islamic culture” without mentioning what those attributes are or how this term should be defined. However, the composite expression Iranian-Islamic has been used extensively in IRIB, the state-sponsored media.⁶ This research will further

5. For more information on the principals see the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance website, retrieved from <http://www.farhang.gov.ir/fa/intro/duty>.

6. IRIB stands for Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (Farsi term: Sedā va Sima-ye Jomhūrī-ye Eslāmī-ye Īrān). It is a large media organization founded in 1979 with the establishment of the Islamic Republic regime. Under the Pahlavi regime, the organization was called National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT). According to the Islamic Republic's constitution, radio and television should be “aligned with the course of perfection of the Islamic Revolution and serve the promotion of the Islamic culture and to this end benefit from the healthy collision of different ideas and seriously avoid spreading and propagating destructive and anti-Islamic tenets.”

examine how this legacy has been used in the women-exclusive park design in relation to policies of gender segregation.

The main focus of this research is on the emergence of women-exclusive parks in the capital city, using the example of Mothers' Paradise as a case study. A central goal is to show how public urban spaces, in this case places for leisure and recreation for women—become not only a way to live but a mode of social resistance. This research, then, will examine the notion of 'agency' within this context. The research is an outcome of two months of field study, observations, and interviews with the park participants, whom include women users, security guards, gardeners, sellers, and the staff involved with the park on a daily basis. In addition, the study is dependent on secondary sources like books, journal articles, manuscripts, magazine articles, newspapers, online reports and interviews, government websites, and personal blogs. In recent years, personal blogs have been popular online public spaces for the new generation youth who wish to share opinions and ideas freely in public.

Contextual and Theoretical Framework

The processes of state formation in Iran and the development of gender-segregation policies could be better understood if studied in accordance with Foucauldian concepts of *governmentality* and *exception*. Even so, we must note that Iran, as a Middle Eastern country, presents a sociopolitical context that is significantly different from what Foucault describes. The Foucauldian framework for experiencing governmentality is concerned with systematic and pragmatic regulations of everyday urban practices by liberal governments in relation to their self-regulated social subjects. As Foucault states, governmentality covers a range of practices that “constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other” (Foucault, 1998, p. 300) Aligned with his ideas, Nicholas Rose and Mitchell Dean both explore how contemporary Western societies are governed with freedom taken as the norm. According to these scholars, freedom is central to contemporary regimes because it structures contemporary government itself. To this extent, the idea of freedom could be considered an antithesis of government. Rose states:

To be governed through our freedom: the very idea seems paradoxical. Freedom appears, almost by definition, to be the antithesis of government: freedom is understood in terms of the act of liberation from bondage or slavery, the condition of existence in liberty, the right of the individual to act in any desired way without restraint, the

power to do as one likes. (Rose, 1999, p. 62)

In the Western view, rules of exception can be positively viewed as decisions to consider selected populations and spaces as targets of calculative choices and value orientation (Ong, 2006, p. 5). Contemporary mentalities of rule introduce a new conception of freedom. The notion of freedom and the free conduct of individuals, according to Dean, becomes "the principle by which government is to be rationalized and reformed" (Dean, 2009, 155). Rose's idea of freedom defines the term not as an abstract ideal, but as material, technical, practical, governmental. Freedom has inspired the invention of a variety of technologies of governing. According to him, freedom as an object of investigation "defines the problem-space within which contemporary rationalities of government compete" (Rose, 1999, 94).

We should be aware that this research applies the idea of governmentality to the context of Iran, as a Middle Eastern country. One of the significant features of the cities under the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic regime is that they are severely controlled. Since the 1979 revolution, public spaces have been watched by the Morality Police for "proper" moral behaviors. This has affected women and young people in their everyday urban social relations and activities.⁷ What is evident in recent years is that new norms are being created both by the government and the people, such as legalizing the unveiling of women in particular controlled urban zones (for example, in the case of women-only parks); constructing shopping malls where youths can gather and mingle; and designing theme parks in central Tehran for controlling the youths' leisure activities, gatherings, and movements. In these cases, urban public spaces turn into spaces of negotiation for the experience of a certain type of controlled and regulated freedom, which I attempt to explore. This paper then becomes a platform for experiences of a certain kind of freedom to be observed and identified. These experiences will help readers with a Western understanding of freedom to understand the concept in the context of a controlled regime of power. According to architectural historian Nezar AlSayyad, an ongoing clash of interests, irrespective of religious or cultural conflict, between Western countries and Muslim countries leads to different notions of democracy and human rights (AlSayyad, 2002, pp. 106-107). Understandings of certain values, such as reason, tolerance, and freedom, therefore differ according to ideological viewpoints.

7. The Morality Police, as an organ the president does not directly control, targets women in public and even private spaces in order to control their bodies, movements, and behavior in general based on strict Islamic codes of public behavior.

To better explore the concept of freedom in a sociopolitical context, this research primarily draws inspiration from the idea of “make-believe” as a transition point as well as a threshold space. In Yael Navaro-Yashin’s book *Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*, the “make-believe space” is a social construct that refers not only to space and territory but also to modes of governance and administration and to material practice (Navaro-Yashin, 2012). The make-believe that is discussed as an analytical category encompasses both “tangible materiality” and the “phantasmatic” without either being favored. Therefore, the material in the making and the phantasmatic in the believing simultaneously contribute to both imagination and reality. This process of simultaneous making and believing invokes practices and ideologies in a specific make-believe space. The make-believe therefore confers a spatial quality on temporality in a present history. Navaro-Yashin argues, “all spaces, when aligned with state practices, have make-believe qualities” (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, p. 6).

This research uses the idea of ‘make-believe space’ to create a framework for a new understanding of freedom as a ‘threshold space,’ existing somewhere between religious realities and modern global fantasies in the context of the Islamic Republic. This space in between reality and fantasy reconfigures relationships between governing and the governed. It can be argued that the new power relations that emerge in this threshold space produce a specific mode of governmentality in the context of the Islamic Republic. However, this mode of governance is different from what scholars such as anthropologist Aihwa Ong refer to in a Western context. It cannot be considered a style of reasoning and problematization that is concerned with transforming situations of uncertainty. It simply illustrates the effect of an ideological transformation in a conservative context of urban design and public spaces (Ong, 2006, p. 178). The make-believe will therefore be explored in relation to the specific site of the women-exclusive park, an enclosed publicness.

Exclusion: A Mechanism of Limiting ‘Freedom’

An investigation of the dynamic transformation of women before and after the 1979 revolution shows how attitudes toward women’s bodies have been framed and coded across various domains such as the family, the state, and political and religious organizations. According to Minoou Moallem, professor of gender and women’s studies at University of California at Berkeley, masculinist narratives of an Islamic *ummat*, or fraternal community, a modern construction based on an imagined Islamic community, “relies heavily on the bodies of women and their mediation between the ‘we-ness’ of the Islamic *ummat* and the ‘other’ ” (Moallem, 2005, pp. 25-26) In this process, women

turn into ideological subjects, as their bodies become part of the conception of identity in the paradoxical context of a modern Islamic city. In this sense, the paradoxical desire for the freedom to be “unfree” emerges at a societal level (Moallem, 2005, p. 16). Subsequently, the notion of the self becomes increasingly dependent upon “the rearticulation of the personal and the political” (Moallem, 2005, p. 13).

Under restricted Islamic coding for ‘proper lifestyle,’ a man’s masculinity depended—and still depends, to a degree—on his economic power and moral authority over his household women. The role of women, however, was to develop skills in cooking, childbirth, taking care of children, cleaning and organizing domestic domains, and retaining their husband’s interest in sexual relations. According to Ong, male protection of female sexuality outlined the boundaries between spaces of males and females. This way, a woman could be considered her man’s property and controlling this property defined the collective identity of men in a traditional Islamic society (Ong, 1990, p. 261). The patriarchal control of women’s bodies and sexuality is a major subject of religious and cultural discourses on how privileging heteronormativity in modernized societies creates gendered and sexual citizenship “as sites of exclusion and inclusion” (Moallem, 2005, p. 24).

The only way ‘exception’ can be discussed is to weigh the term against what can be considered normal in the same context. Ong describes the exception as “an extraordinary departure in policy that can be deployed to include as well as to exclude” (Ong, 2006, p. 5). This simultaneous colligation of inclusion and exclusion illuminates mutations in the nature of sovereignty and citizenship. In spaces of exclusion, the geography of citizenship is reconfigured and citizenship becomes disarticulated. Exception therefore allows for a measure of sovereign flexibility to be recognized by the population. The political exception is a decision made outside of a general rule and, subsequently, the exception itself becomes a new rule (Agamben, 1998). In the case of the park, the space of exception regulates a public understanding of how an Iranian-Islamic woman is allowed to be uncovered in a limited form of public space. This gives the women who use the park a new understanding of freedom and of how they should appear in different types of public spaces in the city, which eventually becomes a mental law.

A Historical Background on the Importance of the ‘Veil’ in Iran

Gender is significantly related to the ways in which power is produced and mediated within modern culture. In the altering sociopolitical and religious context of Iran, veiling (*hijab*) has been one of the most crucial factors in

staging difference and in underlining gender, power, and authority (Moallem, 2005, p. 28). Before and after the 1979 revolution, disciplinary practices of veiling and unveiling in public and the “positioning of the body in the order of the visible has been instrumental in practices of freedom”, and women’s understandings of the term (Moallem, 2005, p. 70). The dichotomous notions of the veiled Muslim woman and the Western woman juxtapose freedom and ‘unfreedom.’ Moallem argues that “through dichotomous notions of veiled/unveiled, Islamic/secular, Western/non-Western, and free/unfree, different and sometimes oppositional models of femininity are asserted and performed through the consumption of goods and ideas” (Moallem, 2005, p. 16). According to her, the secular space is an amalgamation of religion, culture, and power. Therefore, any understanding of the term ‘nation’ needs to be informed by the issue of religion, particularly in the context of the Middle East (Moallem, 2005, pp. 11-14).



Figure 3. The park allows women to take off their Islamic coverings. (source: by author)

In 1933 and 1934, a Reza Shah instituted mandatory unveiling (*kashf-e-hijab*) in public, along with the encouragement of men to dress in a Western way. One of the king’s strategies to rebuild a civilized and secular nation state—part of his projects of modernization and Westernization—involved the cleansing of religion. ‘Westernization’ in the Pahlavi era, according to Moallem, meant “the redisciplining of the body through the process of nation-state building” (Moallem, 2005, p. 12). Shah’s imposition of ‘Western lifestyle’ forced veiled women to take off their scarfs in public, despite their religious beliefs.

In this civilizing mission, modernity and tradition were opposing poles. In Reza Shah’s conception of tradition, religion was the opposite of modernity and modernization (Moallem, 2005). Moallem argues that the revolution,

alongside the convergence of seemingly contradictory ideas such as religion and secularism and the identities of Iranians and Muslims, enabled the emergence of a specific Islamic subject. This revolutionary subject and individual self thus transformed by changing appearances of the veil to negotiate day-to-day political, legal, religious, and economic obstacles. This marked a point of transformation and change in the construction of "civic body" as "an abstract body that is made public and politicized in a way that displays the connections between individual and collective identities, or that is marked as a place of inclusion or exclusion" (Moallem, 2005, p. 28).

Modernization for Reza Shah was a process of racialization wherein the local was the inferior and the West was the superior. Women, in particular, "were born among the uncompromising world of binaries in the middle of a cultural war" (Moallem, 2005, p. 2). Although modern notions of femininity were evolving nationally, traditional families continued practicing patriarchic ways of controlling women's bodies and minds. Women were therefore the subjects as well as the objects of this war. In opposition to the ideologies of the Pahlavi regime, the new state created various moral codes for the citizens regarding how to behave in public. They started to emphasize on Islamic rules of morality, particularly for women.

With the 1979 revolution, social norms started to change, but the path was not smooth. Mandatory female covering and the act of forced veiling by the Islamic state created social disorder and turmoil despite the state's initial promises of 'freedom of choice'. However, the Islamic government never succeeded in forming a national understanding of what was considered a 'proper cover.' Women who were gradually secularized during the Pahlavi era were now forced to be veiled and to adopt the traditional and religious ideologies of the conservative Islamic state. The dress codes were never constant and transformed over the years, even though *hijab* was a fixed rule for the appearance of every woman in public.

According to 2011 demographic reports from the Statistical Center of Iran (www.amar.org.ir), almost half (49%) of the total population (75,149,699) were women. Article 3 of the Constitution of the Iranian Islamic of Iran lists state goals, and among them Code 9, the "abolition of all forms of undesirable discrimination and the provision of equitable opportunities for all, in both the material and the intellectual spheres." It also states as tenets (in Code 14) "securing the multifarious rights of all citizens, both women and men, and

providing legal protection for all, as well as the equality of all before the law.”⁸ Women in Iran, however, in their quest for political and gender equity, suffered throughout the history, and none of these codes was fully applied in actual life.



Figure 4. Fences that control the inside view from the outside. (source: by author)

It is striking that, in recent years, fashion has become a signifier for social modernization, particularly in the case of young women in Tehran. It represents a silent resistance that operates through women’s bodies in response to the coercive acts of patriarchy enforced by the state and by the society that has suppressed them for many years. Young women designers (who were born after the revolution) are creating their own individual and private fashion brands in the country as a form of active opposition against the imposed dress codes. Strategically, their secular trend is now redefining ‘mandatory Islamic coverings,’ thereby creating a paradox. This form of silent resistance was evident during my observations in the park area. What this study intends to show is that the construction of women-exclusive parks, despite being a governmental strategy and a method (practiced by the municipality) of assembling the Iranian-Islamic women citizen, provides a public exhibition of the conflict between freedom and control. This mechanism invokes a sense of resistance in the form of everyday activities and generates a new understanding of freedom in young women users of the park.

Therefore, throughout the research, a twofold understanding of freedom will be employed: a nation-building apparatus in the hands of the conservative

8. For more information see Iran Human Rights Documentation Center: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/english/human-rights-documents/iranian-codes/3017-the-constitution-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html?p=5>.

government and a 'nonmovement' representing a mode of silent resistance for the young women. The term "nonmovement," coined by Asef Bayat, refers to "the collective actions of noncollective actors" that embody shared practices of ordinary people whose activities trigger social change (Bayat, 2013, p. 15). In this research, the nonmovement implies women's deprivation of self-expression in public, their struggle to improve conditions of social life.

A Case Study in Tehran: Mother's Paradise

On 15 hectares of land in Northern Tehran (District 3), where the view from outside is blocked by a number of tall trees, as well as a 13-foot (4-meter) iron wall, exists an exclusive paradise for women [Figure 1]. In my view it represents a green cage of freedom [Figure 2]. Around a thousand women visit the park every weekday.⁹ The identity of the park transforms one day a week—Friday—when the gates open up to all family members. This means that women using the park cannot be unveiled on Fridays (Mousavi Khesal, 2015). On that particular day, women are only allowed to use the park as they use any other public space in the city: by accepting the state codes and regulations regarding how to appear in public. It is on Fridays, then, that the notions of freedom and constraint collide to show how conditional the rules of freedom are.

The first gender-exclusive park in the capital city is a public space where women can freely take off their scarves and Islamic coverings and let their bodies feel the natural sunlight without men's interference. The municipality defines women's parks as green public areas that are secure and restricted, in order to provide opportunities for social interactions and recreational activities for women.¹⁰ Tehran Municipality declares the park's purpose to be "a response to women's 'real' needs in accordance with religious values and local and national cultures."¹¹ This shows that because of the existing restrictions in other public urban spaces, the park aims to provide a "secure and healthy environment for women users to spend social hours."¹² The municipality believes that the existence of such spaces is a practical solution that achieves two goals: first, it respects Islamic women's religious ideologies and beliefs; second, it is compatible with the Islamic Republic's laws and religious codes. In recent years, Tehran Municipality as a civic institution

9. Taken from the official site of Tehran Municipality, retrieved from region3.tehran.ir.

10. Translated from Tehran Municipality's official website. Parks.tehran.ir.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Taken from Agence France Presse. "Headscarves off in Tehran's First Female-Only Park." 2016. Accessed October 29. <https://www.wired.com/2016/06/afp-headscarves/>.

has attempted to reunite the new-generation youths with the Islamic government. Construction of a considerable number of public and recreational spaces such as parks, museums, libraries, shopping centers, sports centers, and other areas, is a proof of the municipality's determination.

During the first decade after the 1979 revolution, leisure and sports were considered "unnecessary and un-Islamic," particularly for women (Shahrokni, 2014, p. 93). The Islamic government's broader goal, the production of pious mothers who followed Islamic coding of the state, forcefully dominated women's bodies and behaviors in public. According to Nazanin Shahrokni, an individual scholar whose work is focused on gendered spaces in Iran, after the revolution, between the years 1979 and 2009, the state-imposed religious laws and Islamic coding that were related to gender issues, particularly in the case of women subjects. According to Shahrokni, it was in the 1990s, under the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, when the idea of women-exclusive parks first came into being (Shahrokni, 2014). According to the women's magazine *Zan-e Rooz*, in 1993, the Presidential Center of Women's Affairs, led by Shahla Habibi (Iran's presidential advisor) pushed Tehran Municipality to designate Taleghani Park a women-only park. This was the first time since the revolution that the idea of women's health in public started to become significant to the Islamic government, but the project never fully developed. However, this started serious discussions inside and outside the country regarding women's issues under the Islamic Republic. Shahrokni argues that this change from prohibition to production represented a shift from purely ideological expressions of state power to a more practical understanding of women's everyday problems.

Consequently, questions of women's leisure and exercise in public spaces and public health became crucial to the Islamic government, which resulted in the construction of new types of spaces. Moreover, it resulted in new understandings of freedom and control of women's bodily movements in public space. Shahrokni argues that the gradual (re)opening of spaces for women could therefore be considered in terms of the story of gradual (re)orientation of state power (Shahrokni, 2014, p. 97). Further, she argues, the problem-space of 'unhealthy bodies' of compulsorily veiled women in public justifies the need for the opening of women-only parks (Shahrokni, 2014, p. 92). The competing power dynamics in this case reflect how various state institutions under the Islamic Republic regime need to adapt their ideologies and the so-called 'Islamic modes of thinking' in order to more favorably situate themselves in the broader global and transnational context. According to Shahrokni, women-only park projects were a state solution to globally recognized health

problems in women (Shahrokni, 2014, p. 93).

In 2005 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the president of Iran and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf was appointed Tehran's mayor. They were both in the group of conservative politicians. With the help of Ghalibaf, however, it signaled the start of a new phase of transformation and ideological change in the capital city. In 2007, the opening of Mother's Paradise reaffirmed women's



Figure 5. The park's women staff are in charge of management, security, gardening, and other responsibilities. (source: Islamic Republic News Agency website retrieved from irna.ir)

need for exercise and leisure, which was a public health victory. Women's outdoor exercise in public spaces that was earlier considered un-Islamic and unnecessary was now promoted and supported by the municipality. It became a state obligation to serve women "as both mothers of the nation (with needs), and citizens (with rights)" in public spaces.

Farangis Najibullah, a journalist at Radio Free Asia, in an interview with Sedigheh Ghannadi, head of the National Council of Women, said that "even from an aircraft flying over the park, women will not be seen because of the special arrangement of plant and trees" (Najibullah, 2008). According to Ghannadi, the chosen trees, planted in four rows, form a green wall that protects women from being seen from outside. Najibullah noted that some women see the park as "an opportunity to act freely" but others complain that it discriminates against women (Najibullah, 2008). Nayyereh Tavakkoli, an Iranian sociologist, argues that these kinds of gender-exclusive spaces can possibly provide women some opportunities. However, they do not allow women to experience the same level of freedom in other parks of the city (Mousavi Khesal, 2015).



Figure 6. Upper image: sports facilities and walking paths inside the park; Lower right image: Houra Cultural Center; Lower middle image: A kiosk and coffee shop in the park; Lower left image: Playroom for kids (source: author's archive)

The park is monitored for 'proper behavior' both inside and outside the fences. A team of 15 male security guards controls three main entrance gates, in order to stop outsiders from ogling women who use the park. They are the only men who are involved with park use. The online magazine *Vista News Hub* reports that a team of 35 women is in charge of control and management inside the park area (Mousavi Khesal, 2015).

Fars News Agency reports that the park offers various kinds of facilities, including different exercise areas such as roofed and unroofed spaces for fitness, swimming pools and saunas, a walking path, an artificial lake, small shopping kiosks, an amphitheater, areas for religious gatherings and group meetings, a restaurant, and a coffee shop. There is also a place for kids to play while mothers are exercising (Fars News Agency, 2015). According to *Vista Hub News*, the park has Yoga classes for women as well as biking facilities (Mousavi Khesal, 2015). In Iran, women are not allowed to bike in public areas, so women were pleased to hear about biking inside the park [Figures 3-5]. However, by the order to the municipality—and for reasons unknown—the biking section stopped offering any services to the park's users.

Women can enter the park once they have been checked by the security

guards for cellphones and cameras at the entrance gates. The municipality initially did not care if women took photos or shot videos inside, but the policies changed as a result of moral control and photos and videos were banned in the protected area of the park. According to online statistics and officially released interviews, even under the repressive rules of the Islamic Republic regarding women in public spaces, most women of the lower-middle class feel satisfied using the park.

In my personal interviews conducted on the site with almost 15 young women user interviewees of ages between 22-35, eleven claimed that the park is a nice outdoor space for women who live in Tehran. They described it a place to breathe fresh air and feel the sunlight. Ironically, the air pollution in Tehran is one of the main reasons for heart diseases and breathing problems for the city inhabitants. Nine women interviewees mentioned that the park provides a fresh atmosphere for them to breathe better while doing exercise. Parisa, a 24 year-old interviewee, called the park “a valuable award for the polluted capital city”. Six other interviewees appreciated the park and found it a safe place where drug users and sellers stay away from it.

The notion of safety was also expressed by The National, a private English-language daily newspaper published in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The newspaper article reported on interviews with women users of the same



Figure 7. Biking area inside Mother's Paradise. (source: Jamejamonline.ir, courtesy by Tara Mokhtar)

park and showed their satisfaction with the control factor. The interviews revealed that the majority of women users found the women-only park a safer place than other parks in the city. For them, the safety was a result of having women security guards and women staff working in the fenced park area (Sinaiee, 2008). In other words, the contradictory notions of freedom and control were considered positive factors to mark this women-only space a successful design.



Figure 8. All cellphones and cameras are banned inside the protected park area (source: by author)

Conclusion: Dispossession of Identity

Women's status has been transformed by social and political forces many times, and changing relationships, private and public, between men and women have consequently controlled the family and the body politic. As Ong argues, "in modernizing societies, 'women' and 'the family' enter into the social construction of national politics." Therefore, the social constructions of gender and family are always, in effect, "class specific" (Ong, 1990, p. 272). Accordingly, an article in *The Washington Post* admits that Iranian authorities made the case in 2012 that un-Islamic dress is a symptom of Western cultural interference and should therefore "be considered a matter of national security" (Rezaian, 2012). In Iran, agency, in terms of autonomy or adherence,

differs according to class. Whereas working-class women still pretty much accept Islamic rules and religious duties, upper-middle-class women most often display their disapproval in silent resistance. As discussed above, this form of opposition is more evident in recent years, as young women apply fashion to the mandatory style of public *hijab* in order to appear 'differently' in public. These attitudes represent women's opposition to the conservative regulations and eventually affect the everyday social spaces and relations.

Proper dressing as an Islamic cultural coding describes prescribed ways of covering bodies—particularly those of women. According to that coding, women are not allowed to display their bodies and beauty in public because doing so may put their chastity at risk. Since the revolution, and even before, during the Pahlavi era, these types of coding that define proper ways of dressing and proper appearance in public have been controversial among women of various classes, particularly in the modernizing capital city. In this regard, codes of proper dressing introduce a 'mechanism of normalization' by which the Islamic state can appropriate or moderate religious regulations in this global era. The word proper also carries with it the aim of stabilizing gender norms in a broader political context. This way, desire and law become inextricably intertwined. According to Judith Butler, "in this performative intertwinement, gender and sexual categories, identities, and fantasies are reconstituted and reinvented in unforeseen ways as the law 'strives' to produce, affirm, consolidate, thwart, commodify, or render them proper" (Butler, 2015, p. 46).

The results of this case study of the park reveal that the make-believe constantly creates and recreates itself through fences and walls, inside and outside this women-exclusive territory. From these borders of control emerge new understandings of the term freedom for a new type of citizen subject (object), which is under construction, both inside and outside this inner-city partition zone. This way, the individual creates a protected domain in an exclusive landscape built by the municipality. I suggest that in the context of the Islamic Republic's capital city, the gendered park is a space where the 'Iranian-Islamic woman'—as a postrevolutionary state tradition—legitimizes the meaning of freedom for women. It defines the limits of such freedom in a bounded territory, in what is called a public space. The park becomes a 'threshold space,' where reality and imagination coincide, engendering qualities of a new social form of living. This territory eventually becomes a place where an ideology and a dream can transform into a tangible, solid, material space in which "the make-believe is real" (Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

This research also raises questions that are not necessarily part of the discourse, such as questions regarding Islamic feminism and its sociopolitical context, Islamic tradition and its effects on gender, and the greater Middle Eastern context. These present areas for further research. The park, its users, and the related policies will likely change over time; the situation is dynamic and ever changing; such changes, too, will necessitate further investigation and field research.

References

- Abrahamian, E. (1993). *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- “AFP—Headscarves off in Tehran’s First Female-Only Park.” 2016. Accessed October 29. <https://www.wired.com/2008/06/afp-headscarves/>
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- AlSayyad, N., & Castells, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam: Politics, culture, and citizenship in the age of globalization*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, and Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of California at Berkeley.
- Ansari, A. M. (2012). *The politics of nationalism in modern Iran*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bahramitash, R., & Hooglund, E. (2011). *Gender in contemporary Iran: Pushing the boundaries*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Bayat, A. (2013). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East* (2nd ed.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Behdjat, H., & Rifkin, S. B. (2009 Sept-Oct). A new role for women health volunteers in urban Islamic Republic of Iran. *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, 15(5), 1164–1173.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2004). *The location of culture* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2013). *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Cranz, G. (1989). *The politics of park design: A history of urban parks in America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dean, M. M. (2009). *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society* (2nd ed.). London, UK: SAGE.
- Fars News Agency. Shahr-e 19 Hectâri dar Dast-e Zanân. Retrieved March 18, 2015, from <http://www.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=8702240307>
- Foucault, M. (1998). *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*. Edited by P. Rabinow. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Foucault, M., Ewald, F., Fontana, A., & Davidson, A. I. (2009). *Security, territory,*

population: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*. Edited by M. Senellart. Translated by G. Burchell. New York, NY: Picador.

Joyce, P. (2003). *The rule of freedom: Liberalism and the modern city*. London, UK: Verso.

Mbembe, A. (2003, December 21). Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1), 11–40. doi:10.1215/08992363-15-1-11

Moallem, M. (2005). *Between warrior brother and veiled sister: Islamic fundamentalism and the politics of patriarchy in Iran*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mousavi Khesal, S. Nim Negâhi be Tarh-e Ehdâs-e Parkhaye Zanân dar Tehrân. *Vista News Hub* [Electronic Magazine]. Retrieved April 1, 2015, from <http://vista.ir/article/123913>

Najibullah, F. (2008, May 17). Iran: Tehran opens controversial women-only park. Retrieved from RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty website, Iran section: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1117504.html>

Navaro-Yashin, Y. (2012). *The make-believe space: Affective geography in a postwar polity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ong, A. (1999, November 1). Muslim feminism: Citizenship in the shelter of corporatist Islam. *Citizenship Studies* 3(3), 355–71. doi:10.1080/13621029908420720

———. (2006). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. (1990, May 1). State versus Islam: Malay families, women's bodies, and the body politic in Malaysia. *American Ethnologist* 17(2), 258–76.
region3.tehran.ir > Akhbâr-e Boostân-e Mâdarân. Retrieved March 21, 2015, from <http://region3.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=843>

Rezaian, J. (2012, July 21). Struggle over what to wear in Iran. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/struggle-over-what-to-wear-in-iran/2012/07/21/gJQAbkspzW_story.html

Rose, N. S. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Semati, M. (Ed.). (2008). *Media, culture and society in Iran: Living with globalization and the Islamic State*. London: Routledge.

Shahidi, H. (2007). *Journalism in Iran: From mission to profession*. London, UK: Routledge.

Shahrokni, N. (2014). The Mothers' Paradise: Women-only parks and the dynamics of state power in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 10(3), 87–108.

Sinaiee, M. (2008, September 2). All-female park opens in Tehran. *The National*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/all-female-park-opens-in-tehran>